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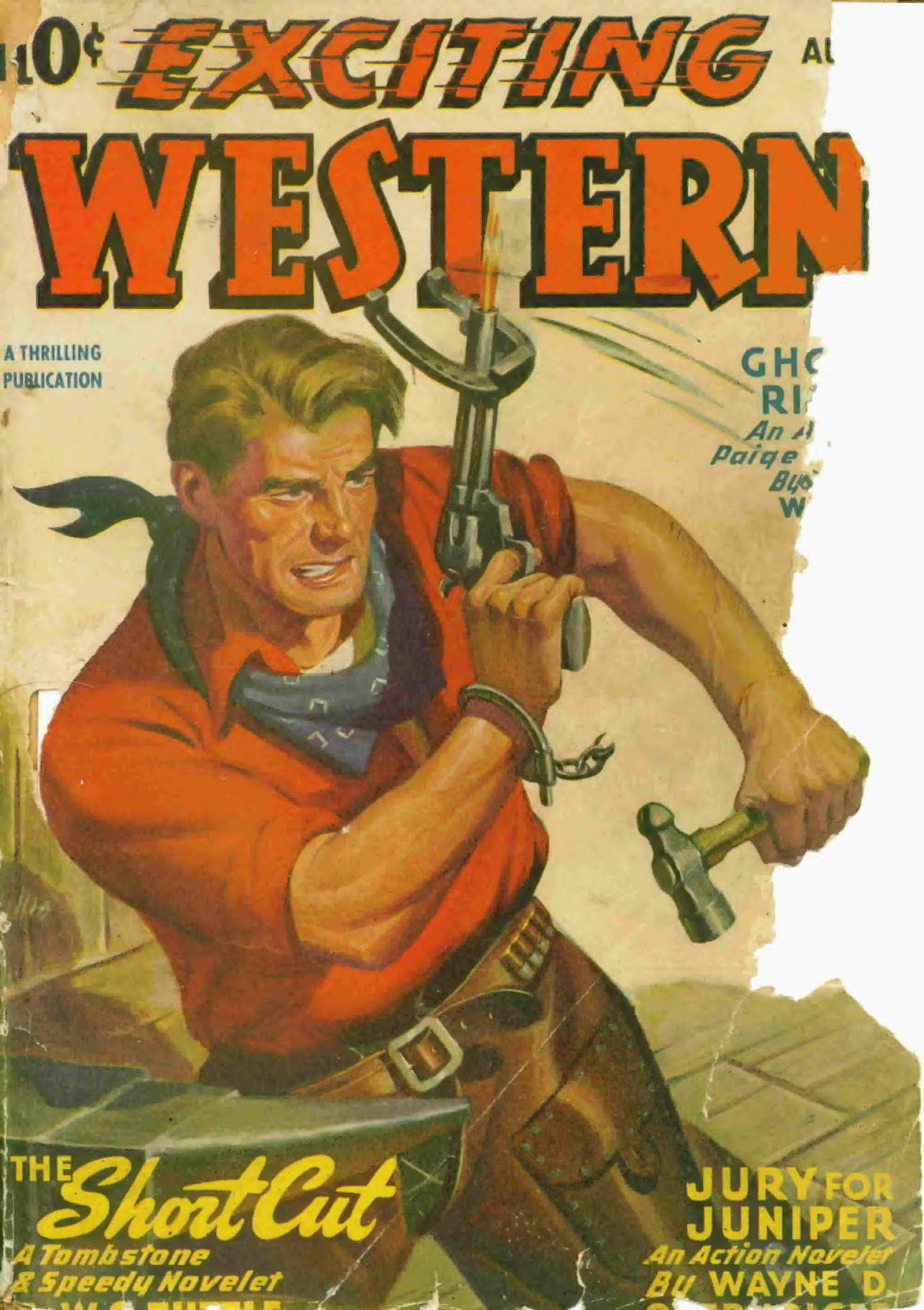

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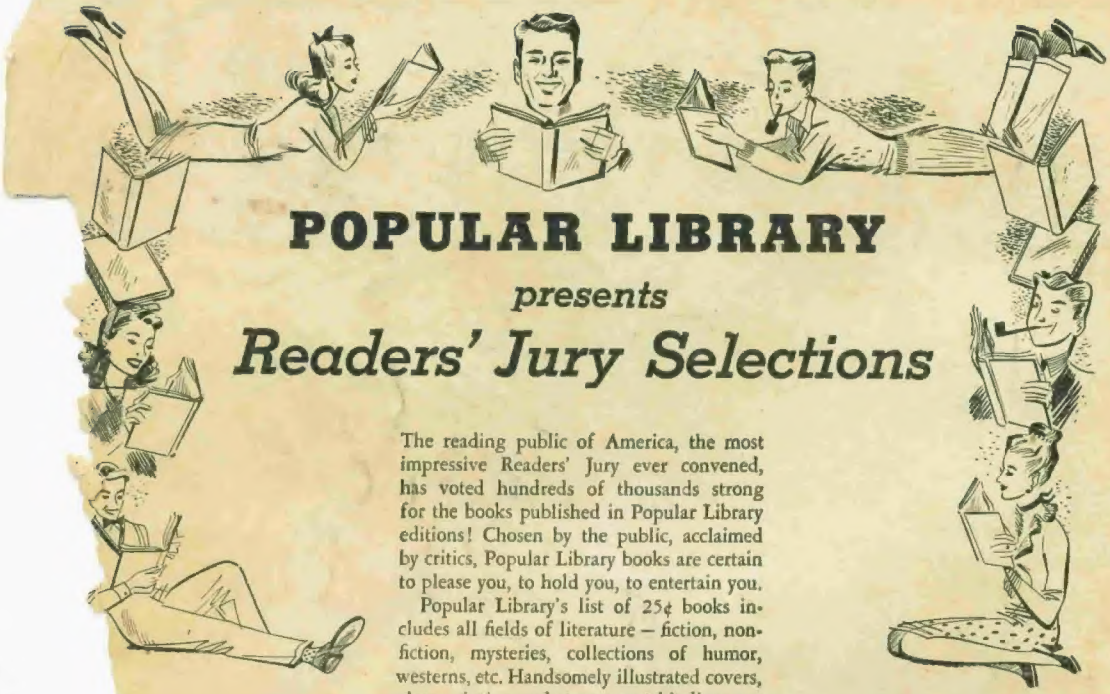

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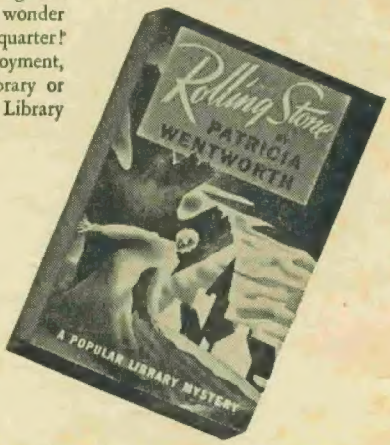

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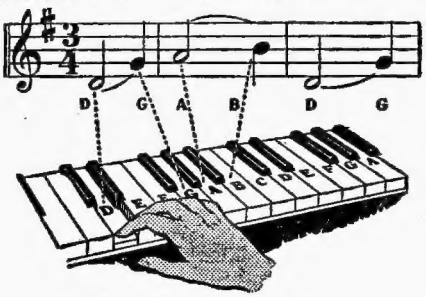

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A Tombstone and Speedy Novelet

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By W. C. TUTTLE

The rollicking range waddies, Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, don't like to waste energy—so when a train robbery and rustling mystery comes along they just take it nice and easy, and then happen to slide right into the solution! 9

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A Department for Readers Conducted by CAPTAIN RANGER

THE hombre who knows something about trapping fur-bearers, or the fellow who craves to learn can find a wide scatterment of trapping opportunity in the West. He can take his wife along to live with him in the wilderness, if she's the outdoor type of girl. A lot of modern trappers do. But hitched or single, the trapper ought to be in for some good seasons for several, perhaps many years to come.

The war did it. Its effect on trapping was definite and far-reaching. During the time we were engrossed with the big job of putting the squash on Hitler and Hirohito, trappers too did their bit. They came out of the woods, down from the mountains and in from the fork of the creeks.

Leaving their cabin homes snug and locked against the day of their return, they joined the armed forces, or went to the cities and engaged in essential war work. Patriotism thinned the ranks of these outdoor men. Just how much is a story that hasn't fully been told, but it is estimated that at least in one western trapping section perhaps close to 90 percent of the professional trappers left their traplines untended during the war.

An Increase in Wild Life

As a result wildlife has increased tremendously during the past few years. True of the valuable fur-bearers, this is equally true of the crafty predatory creatures, animals such as wolves and coyotes. Regionally the increase has been widespread. It has been noted in the far North, in Alaska, and in the eastern trapping states as well as in the West.

Large and small animals alike have been staging a numerical comeback due to the dearth of trappers and hunters in the field during the war.

For example, last year there was a regular bull market in bears. Up around Patten, Maine, some 51 of the big bruins were killed. One man shot 16, and another, near Eastbrook, shot 3 in one day.

Michigan too had a bear boom. So much so that the State has declared a year-round open season on bears in about a score of counties.

In the small animal department last year saw New York's first open season on otter in ten years. Trappers, under conservation authority regulations, were limited to 6 pelts, and not all the State was thrown open. But it's a start, additional evidence of the definite increase of fur-bearers. And last year the fox take in New York was, according to preliminary estimates, destined to be greater than at any time in history—an estimated 36,000 or more.

The Wily Fox

Because of the State's unprecedently high fox population the N. Y. S. Conservation Department last year utilized professional trappers to help catch the over-abundant foxes and enlarged its schedule of trapping demonstrations given to teach trappers and others how best to trap the wily animal.

In addition expert trappers were made available by the Department to help out in local cases where poultrymen and farmers were suffering heavily from fox damage. There was talk of establishing a fox bounty in some sections.

Out West the same thing has been happening on a similar scale. Take Texas for instance. Stock owners there have been bombarding commission officials with complaints that coyotes are causing extensive damage in south Texas and up along the Canadian river in the Panhandle.

(Continued on page 88)

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I'LL GO, SON

MY SON GAMBLING WITH THUGS! THIS COULD MAKE A NASTY SCANDAL

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Tombstone, braced against the platform, fired twice, and his adversary stumbled and fell

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By W. C. TUTTLE

The rollicking range detectives don't like to waste energy, so when a train robbery and rustling mystery comes along they just take it nice and easy—and then slide right into the solution!

CHAPTER I

A Shot on the Trail

TOMBSTONE" Jones and "Speedy" Smith were very miserable. Someone in Lazy Moon Valley had told Tombstone of a short cut out of the valley, and Tombstone was always in favor of the shortest distance between two points. That is all right, if you have a destination in mind—which Tombstone didn't have.

Just now they were coming down a canyon, facing a bitter wind, in which there was a hint of snow—or at least, cold rain. They wore yellow slickers, which flapped in the wind. Speedy's had only one button, and that at the collar, which caused him untold misery, as the slicker billowed out like a sail in the wind, and threatened to blow him off the saddle any time he shifted his position.

Speedy was five feet, seven inches tall, shaped like a reed, and was about the same weight. Tombstone Jones was built exactly

A TOMBSTONE AND SPEEDY NOVELET

like Speedy, except that in his high-heels and sombrero he was seven feet tall. These two had finished up a job for the Cattlemen's Association, and were evidently trying to get a bird's-eye view of the country.

"You and yore short-cuts!" groaned Speedy dismally. "Here we are, on top of the world, a-headin' for the North Pole. Didn't the man say where this here alleged cut-off would take us?"

"He jist said it was a short way out of the valley," replied Tombstone. "I plumb forgot to ask him where it'd take us."

"Naturally. But if we can't talk Eskimo,

TOMBSTONE JONES

we better go back. I tell yuh I'm froze to the bone. Nothin' in sight down yonder, except pine trees, high rocks and rain, comin' down the divide."

Tombstone drew his slicker closer around his skinny neck, and then tried to beat his arms around his body, which caused his horse almost to leave the hill—and Tombstone Jones.

"At least," he panted, when he got the animal back on the trail, "it warmed me up. I'm good for miles now."

"In less'n an hour it'll be dark," said Speedy. "I'll betcha some explorer will come through here in seven, eight years and find two grizzly skillingtons on the trail. That'll be me and you, Tombstone. He'll mark the spot and—"

"What's skillington?" asked Tombstone.

"That's a man with his insides out and his outsides off."

"Why," queried Tombstone, "would a explorer come through here?"

"Short cut," replied Speedy maliciously. "They're all crazy, too."

"After all," said Tombstone, "we're detectives. We can't get lost."

"That," said Speedy wearily, "is a statement that ain't shared none by Jim Keaton."

"Jim Keaton!" snorted Tombstone. "Yuh know Speedy, the more I work for that *pelicano*, the less I think . . . Oh-oh! Cows comin' up the trail. We ain't lost. As long as there's cows—"

A RIDER spurring past the advancing herd, half-buried in the brush, jerked up his stumbling horse. Tombstone threw up one hand in a trail greeting, and a moment later the man had drawn a gun and shot at them. Speedy's horse flung down its head, started backward in a lunging rear, and went down flat on the trail, while Speedy fell into the brush.

The man had whirled his horse and was going back as fast as his horse could travel in the heavy brush and rocks. Tombstone lifted in his stirrups and sent three shots after the man, the canyon echoing from the bombardment.

"Are yuh all right, Speedy?" asked Tombstone anxiously.

"No, I ain't all right. I'm sore's a boil. My horse is dead."

"I figured he wasn't doin' that act for fun," said Tombstone. "Cut yore saddle loose—no use losin' that, too."

"I've done got the cinch loose!" panted Speedy. "What do yuh reckon made that feller shoot?"

"His brain's prob'ly frost-bitten."

"Yeah!" grunted Speedy. "Prob'ly went back to get a warm one. Here! Hang onto that saddle, until I can git up behind yuh."

The cattle had stopped, some drifting down into the canyon, while others humped their way further up the slope. Speedy crawled up behind Tombstone, who handed the saddle back to him. It is none too comfortable, riding double and carrying a forty-pound saddle.

"I wish I knowed what to do," said Tombstone apprehensively.

"Yo're a detective," reminded Speedy. "Anyway, do somethin'. This blasted hull weighs a ton."

"If we go on down the trail we'll meet that sudden jasper, Speedy."

"Hit for the top of the hill. Mebbe we can make it."

They did. From there they could not see

into the canyon, and the brush wasn't too bad. They went carefully along for a mile or so, but did not see anybody. Finally they came to a hogback, which led down into sort of a small valley, and here they found their trail again.

It was growing dark and there was a spit of rain in the air.

"We better find some place to hole up, or this broomtail we're ridin' will have perm'nent bow-legs," said Speedy. "I wish this here saddle of mine had wheels on it. We could haul it behind."

"This here country don't look inhabited noways," sighed Tombstone.

At that moment they heard a locomotive whistle, far down ahead of them.

"Sounds good," said Tombstone. "Must be people, where there's a train."

"Prob'ly some people in it," said Speedy, "goin' through here as fast as possible."

A mile further on they broke out into the open. It was raining now, but ahead of them was a small railroad station and a water-tank, perched beside the tracks. They could see the tracks leading away on one side, the heavy grade visible to even an unpracticed eye.

Water was dripping off the eaves of the depot as they dismounted and walked around the narrow platform. It was so nearly dark, too, that the depot agent in this far-away spot had already lighted an oil lamp on his counter. There was no passenger room.

The agent, a slight, hatchet-faced, flea-bitten sort of a person, came to the doorway, an old corn-cob pipe clenched between his teeth.

"Howdy." Tombstone grinned. "Mind if we come in out of the wet?"

"Well, I ain't runnin' no hotel."

"Thank yuh kindly," interrupted Tombstone, and came in, with Speedy at his heels.

It was warm in there, and dry. They took off their old slickers.

The agent surveyed them grimly.

"Just takin' over the place, eh?" he said coldly.

Speedy placed the slickers in a pile on the floor and turned to the agent.

"It's night and it's rainin'," he said slowly. "I hope you ain't one of them fellers who think that hospitality means goin' to a hospital."

"I ain't allowed to have nobody in here," he said.

"That's all right—you've done yore part," said Tombstone. "Nobody ain't goin' to blame yuh for not throwin' us out. How about somethin' to eat?"

THE agent backed against his counter and eyed them grimly.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You two bust in here, not bein' wanted at all, and you've got the gall to want me to feed you."

"That's right," Speedy grinned. "Simple as that. Say! Can yuh send a telegram for us?"

The agent relaxed. "Yes, I can send a telegram—if you pay for it."

"You can take it collect," said Speedy. "Where-at is a pencil?"

Tombstone couldn't read nor write, but Speedy had an education of sorts. So Speedy

SPEEDY SMITH

wrote the telegram to Jim Keaton, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association. It read:

WHERE DO WE GO NEXT AND IS A DEAD HORSE LEGITIMATE EXPENSES. HOW ABOUT LINIMENT. WIRE QUICK OR WE MAY BE GONE.

Speedy signed Tombstone's name. The agent sat down at his desk, eying the telegram, which he proceeded to send. The two cowpokes watched him.

"I never could read that kinda stuff," Tombstone said. "Don'tcha know it?"

"I suspected it," said Speedy dryly. The agent filed the wire.

"So you boys work for the Cattle Association, eh?" he remarked.

"Tophands," bragged Tombstone. "Actually, we run it. Jim Keaton is jist sort of a office boy for me and Speedy."

"That's nice," said the agent. "How'd your

horse get killed?"

"Oh," said Tombstone, "some half-witted cowpoke took a shot at us back yonder and killed the horse."

"That's interestin'," said the agent thoughtfully. "No reason for shootin' at yuh, eh?"

"He prob'ly did have," said Speedy. "Yuh can't tell. Anyway, he didn't stop to tell us his reasons. How about somethin' to eat? I'm hongry."

The agent took them up to his living quarters over the depot, where a pot of stew was warm on the stove. He did his own cooking.

There was a double bed in the place. The agent set out some dishes and put the stew on the table. He said he wasn't very hungry, and he had to be downstairs until after certain trains went through.

The two hungry cowpokes made short work of the stew, while the wind whistled around the eaves and the rain washed down the windows.

"That there bed shore looks awful invitin'," sighed Sleepy. "But it ain't noways big enough for three growed-up men."

Tombstone yawned and nodded. They smoked and eyed the bed, until the agent came up.

"You boys better hop into bed and get a good sleep," he said. "I'll be down at the instrument most all night, I reckon. There's a pretty big storm in the hills tonight, and I'll have to watch things. Go right to bed and don't worry about me. See yuh later."

The agent went back down the stairs. Speedy didn't waste any time in getting undressed. Tombstone was thoughtful, as he pulled off his boots.

"Well, shuck yore duds and hit the hay," said Sleepy.

"Shore, shore," replied Tombstone. "Huh! What made that feller git so danged nice all at once? Growled like a badger at first. Huh!"

"Never look a gift horse in the mouth." said Speedy. "Man, is this a soft bed! I could sleep for a week."

"All yuh think about is personal comfort," said Tombstone. "Me, I've got to do the brain work for two brains. I was just sayin' that this here station agent seemed too polite, like a tinhorn tryin' to bait a greenhorn into a sky-limit poker game."

"How would yuh know?" Speedy yawned.

"I've been baited into them games," Tombstone replied, starting to undress. "I tell yuh that I don't like the looks of this. I'm just curious enough to sit up the rest of the night, but if nothin' happened, then yuh'd be laughin' at me all day tomorrer."

CHAPTER II

No Holdup

TOMBSTONE went to bed, but with misgivings. He was tired, but disturbed in the mind. That man downstairs had gone out of character too quickly.

Then Tombstone got out of bed, went over to the door to the stairway, and listened. But there was another door at the bottom, and this was closed. All he could hear was the staccato clatter of the telegraph sounder occasionally; so he went back to bed.

It was warm up there and the bed was soft; so Tombstone forgot his fears in slumber. Suddenly he was awake. He listened closely. There was little wind now, but a steady drip from the eaves. Then he heard muffled voices. He slid out of bed and felt his way to a front window. It opened noiselessly, and he crouched on the floor, listening. The voices were low, but he could hear them.

"I don't like it—cow detectives, too," a man said.

"I tell you, they're in bed and asleep. I couldn't get rid of 'em. Just a couple of dumb cowpokes. Been asleep for over an hour."

"It's all right," said a deep voice. "We'll cut that train, and be out of here before anybody knows it. We'll tie Andy up now. It's almost time to get busy. C'mon, Andy."

Tombstone scratched his head and studied what he had heard. They were going to tie Andy up and cut the train. Why, that had all the earmarks of a train robbery. And what a place to pull it! Miles away from any other place, nobody there except the depot agent. Maybe cut the wires.

Tombstone felt his way back to the bed, put his hand over Sleepy's mouth and yanked his ear. It was effective. Sleepy sat up like a jack-in-the-box, but never made a sound.

"They're goin' to hold up the train," Tombstone whispered. "Do yuh understand?"

"Leggo m' ear. Holdup, eh? Wait'll I get m'—"

"Come over by the window and listen."

They managed to get back to the window, as the two men came outside. There was some sort of a projection from the front of the depot, and on it hung a red lantern, burning brightly. From far down the canyon came the wail of a locomotive whistle.

The rider was going back as fast as his horse could travel while Tombstone sent three shots after him

"She's on time," one of the men said. "C'mon, I know where that engine will stop. I've spotted it twice."

They went swiftly away in the darkness.

"Didja ever see such hair on a dawg?" Speedy said. "They're goin' to stick up the engine crew, cut off the baggage and express car, and head for the top of the hill.

"That's the idea, I reckon," said Tombstone.

From far down the canyon they saw the sweep of light, as the engine swung around a turn, and again they heard the wail of that whistle.

"Yore duty, Speedy, is to go down and take away that red light," Tombstone said.

"My duty? Why, you long-legged—"

"It's got to be done, Speedy."

"No by me. Mebbe one of them jaspers is lookin' out for just that kind of a move, and I'd get m' earthly envelope punctured. You do it—yo're taller'n I am."

"Listen!" exclaimed Tombstone. "One more turn and that danged train will be in sight, and then it's too blamed late."

"Never too late," said Speedy. "Watch me."

Speedy had brought his Colt forty-five over to the window. Now he rested the gun against the side of the window, took quick aim and squeezed the trigger. The windows rattled from the explosion, but the red light went out in a shower of broken glass.

A few moments later the headlight of the locomotive bathed the depot in light, and the heavy train came grinding in past the little depot, hardly a light showing from the coaches. They watched it, until the tail-lights disappeared around another curve.

Suddenly there was a pencil-like flash of light from up the track, and a bullet smashed into the side of the window, a foot from Speedy's head, and the report of a rifle shot echoed against the hills. Speedy yanked the window down.

"That son-of-a-gun wants to play," he said quietly.

"Yea-a-ah," breathed Tombstone. "Prob'ly irked."

HE FELT his way over to the door, listened for a while, then locked the door and came back to bed. Speedy was already under the blankets. Tombstone sighed as he rolled in.

"I feel better now," he yawned. "Everythin' is cleared up."

Speedy sat up suddenly. "We forgot that depot agent," he said.

"Well we'll prob'ly find him some'ers around in the mornin'. No use botherin' about him tonight."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Speedy. "I hate to be woke up thataway."

"I reckon we'll make it through now. . . ."

It was late next morning when they awoke. The storm had cleared, and sunshine slanted through the windows. Speedy yawned and sat up. Downstairs the telegraph sounder clicked monotonously.

"Mebbe we better find the agent," suggested Speedy. "After all, he treated us fine."

"Yeah," agreed Tombstone. "He's a very thoughtful person. But mebbe we better rustle some breakfast first. There's some aigs on that shelf, and coffee. Mebbe yuh can find some bacon or ham. We'll find him after breakfast. I hate to do any huntin' on a empty stomach."

They ate a hearty breakfast, stacked the dirty dishes on the table and went downstairs. The agent was in an arm-chair, roped tightly, an old towel tied around his head and forced between his lips. His jaw was too cramped for conversation, and his arms and legs were numb. All in all, he was a very miserable and mad person.

"What a way to sleep!" exclaimed Speedy. "Imagine a man givin' up a soft bed to sleep like this. Prob'ly walks in his sleep."

"Mebbe talks in his sleep, too," added Tombstone soberly.

Gradually the agent recovered his speech and locomotion.

"What happened last night?" he whispered painfully.

"Nothin'," replied Tombstone. "We slept fine, thank yuh."

"Who tied me up, and what for?"

"You tell *us*," suggested Speedy.

"Some masked men. Stuck me up and tied me here. You didn't hear 'em?"

"No-o-o-o," drawled Tombstone. "Why'd they do that?"

"I don't know. You say nothin' happened?"

"Nothin' happened to us," said Speedy.

The agent limped over to his desk, as the sounder began clattering again. He opened the key and tapped for a moment, shutting the key and picking up a pencil. They watched him writing a message. It was for them and read:

AM NOT INTERESTED IN DEAD HORSES. GO TO SILVERBEND AND WAIT A LETTER. WIRE RECEIPT OF THIS TELEGRAM.

"Wants a receipt, eh?" grunted Speedy. "Gimme that pencil."

"Ain't interested, huh?" grunted Tombstone.

Speedy wrote:

RECEIVED FROM JIM KEATON ONE TELEGRAM WITHOUT INTEREST ON A DEAD HORSE. RIDING DOUBLE TO SILVERBEND.

"Where-at is Silverbend?" asked Tombstone.

"It's about thirty miles down the line," said the agent huskily.

"Thirty miles—both of us on one horse!"

"I didn't put it there!" snapped the agent, and got busy on his key again.

The two cowpokes went outside.

"Lovely dove, I'll bet that bronc is starved to death right now," Tombstone said. "We forgot him. C'mon!"

But there was no horse, no extra saddle. They had tied him inside an old shed, but the shed was empty. They went outside and stood in the warm sunshine.

"Yuh better wire Jim Keaton and tell him we're walkin'," Tombstone finally said.

Speedy sighed and shook his head. "That's what we get for not mindin' our own business last night. We bust up a train robbery, and lose our horse and saddles. Do we get credit for same? We do not. Them fellers got mad and set us on foot. But we ain't walkin'—not as long as freight trains go to Silverbend. Let's go down the track and wait for one."

They wandered down past the water-tank and sat down on a pile of old ties beside the track. Far up the track a freight whistled.

"And we never thanked the agent for his kindness," Speedy said.

"Yuh can send him a card from Silverbend," said Tombstone.

"But we don't even know his name."

"Send it to Andy the Agent at Gunsight depot. He'll get it."

THEY managed to climb onto a flat-car, as the freight slowed to a walk, and then went on down the winding grades. About ten miles down into a small valley they stopped at Vista Robles, a three-house town. There were several men at the depot, and two of them got on the caboose. About a mile and a half out of the town was a big loading corral, empty now.

It was past noon when they stopped at Silverbend, and the two dusty and tired cowboys climbed off the flat-car. There is nothing more miserable than a cowboy without a horse. On the way down they happened to remember that their war-sacks, the wardrobe trunk of the cowpoke, were still tied to the missing saddles. All they had left were the clothes on their backs.

Between them they had forty dollars. Business looked good in Silverbend, which was a mining town with a cow background. A recent silver strike had given the place a mild boom. Tombstone and Speedy sized up the town. Tombstone had the money in his pocket, but Speedy made him split it, when Speedy saw a roulette wheel in every saloon. Tombstone loved a wheel.

"Yuh can't get tempted more'n twenty dollars," said Speedy, pocketing his half of their wealth. "And twenty don't last long on a wheel."

They went over in front of the one hotel in the town, and sat down to consider their next move. A tall, lean individual came from the hotel, stopped short and looked them over. On the lapel of his stringy vest was a sheriff's star. He wore a walruslike mustache, and his Adam's apple didn't seem to be fastened at any spot; it moved around.

"Howdy, Mister Law," said Speedy, and grinned. "How's crime?"

"Purty good," drawled the sheriff thoughtfully. "I don't reckon I've see you boys around here before. Just got in?"

"Yeah, we're new to yore domaine, Sheriff."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Which way yuh come?"

"From the north," said Speedy quickly.

"Oh, yeah—up around Red Water, eh?"

"That's right. Just drifted in this mornin'."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well, glad to have yuh."

"Are you the feller who greets all strangers?" asked Tombstone.

"No, I don't, ord'narily. My name's Sam Walters."

"Mine's Jones and he's Smith," said Tombstone, by way of introduction.

"Glad to have yuh. Be with us a while, Mr. Jones?"

"That'll all depend on a letter we're waitin' for. If the President tells us to stay, we stay."

"Oh, yo're Gov'ment men, eh? Uh-huh, uh-huh. Well"—he grinned slowly—"I'll tell yuh why I got so nosy. Read this telegram, will yuh?"

Tombstone passed it to Speedy, who read it aloud:

TWO MASKED MEN TIED ME UP LAST NIGHT AND ATTEMPTED TO STOP NO. FORTY-FIVE. FAILED WHEN THEY SMASHED THE RED LIGHT. ONE TALL ONE SHORT, MAY HAVE BOARDED FREIGHT GOING WEST.

ANDY WELLS, AGENT.

The faces of the two cowpokes never changed expression. Speedy handed it back to the sheriff, who put it in his pocket.

"Yuh see, I have to be careful," explained the sheriff.

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Tombstone. "A sheriff has to."

"Well, much obliged, boys. I'll see yuh later."

The sheriff went down the street. Tombstone spat dryly.

"If yuh want to send that postcard, Speedy, Andy's last name is Wells," he said.

Speedy drew a deep breath. "That son-of-a-gun!" he snorted. "Why, if I ever run into him again . . . We might both be in jail right now, if you hadn't lied. Gov'ment men!"

"I didn't say we was—he said it."

"Yeah, that's right. Well, we better hire a room, I reckon."

CHAPTER III

Gov'ment Work

INSIDE the hotel lobby an old rancher was talking loudly to several other men.

"I tell yuh, they got the whole blamed herd!" he crackled. "We threw over a hundred head of beef steers into that loadin' corral near Vista Robles. It was about noon, but there wasn't no cars spotted for us, so we went to town to wait. At dark that corral was as empty as the sheriff's head—every cow gone, I tell yuh. This mornin' we can't find out which way they went, so I caught a freight and come down here to tell the sheriff. A lot of good it done me. He said he'd look into it. Look into it! My gosh, you'd have thought I complained about a hole in the ground."

It was the same man they had seen getting on the freight that morning. That empty loading corral must have been where the cattle which were stolen had been.

Tombstone and Speedy paid for a room, then went to the post-office, but no letter had arrived for Tombstone Jones. On the way back they met Sam Walters, the sheriff, with a short, fat deputy who fairly waddled with his bow-legs. He had a peanutlike nose and a cast in his left eye, which gave him a very confidential expression.

The sheriff introduced him as "Smoky" Falls. Smoky's handshake was a quick twitch and a quick release. His voice was husky, as he said:

"Welcome to Silverbend, gents. Any friend of Sam's is a friend of—uh—Sam's. Glad to meetcha."

"I'll go up to the depot and send that telegram to Andy Wells," said the sheriff. "I reckon he's been drinkin' *tequila* again."

Smoky sat down with Tombstone and Speedy on the hotel porch.

"Sam tells me you two are ridin' sign for the Gov'ment," he said.

"Secret work," said Tombstone quietly.

"Yeah? Can't even hint what she is, eh?"

"Smoky, do yuh read much—books, newspapers, et cettery?"

"I read a book once," replied the deputy. "What about it?"

"If yuh read the papers," explained Tombstone," you'd see that the scientists claim that the oceans are shrinkin' every year. You've seen a ocean, ain't yuh?"

"Nope. I know there is such things."

"They're shrinkin'," said Tombstone a bit dismally. "It's a awful thing to think about. This here country owns a lot of battleships and all kinds of boats, and we've got to have some'ers to float 'em."

"Yeah, I reckon you've got to have water for them things."

"That's right, Smoky. Now don't mention this to a soul, but me and Sleepy are lookin' over this country, trying to find the right spot to put a new ocean. And"—Tombstone lowered his voice carefully—"I don't mind tellin' you that this here valley is just what we've been lookin' for."

"Yea-a-ah? Well, uh—but what'll yuh do for water?"

"Water?" Tombstone laughed shortly. "Smoky, you'd be surprised. All we have to do is put a ce-ment bottom in this here valley, and the rain'll do the rest. It's a cinch."

"Yeah, I can see where—" Smoky blinked thoughtfully. Cement bottom in the valley?" Suddenly he said quietly: "I'll buy a drink. I thought I was a pretty fair two-handed liar, but I find I ain't been around enough. C'mon."

As they started to leave the hotel the old cattleman came out. He was still fuming about his lost cattle. He saw Smoky, and said;

"Well, ain't you and that bug-headed sheriff gone huntin' the men that stole my cows?"

"We'll get around to it, Rio," assured Smoky. "I want yuh to meet Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith, Rio. Gents, this is Rio Boggs, which owns the Circle B spread, out there

in the wilderness north of Vista Robles."

OLD RIO shook hands gravely with the two cowpokes.

"Jones?" he said thoughtfully. "I knowed a Jones once. Awful nice feller. Named Zibe."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Tombstone. "My missin' uncle, Zibe Jones. We ain't heard from him for years. Awful nice feller—smart, too. Yuh know, everybody said I was jist like him. They said I done everything jist like my Uncle Zibe."

"He got hung for stealin' a horse," said Rio soberly.

"There's a family resemblance," said Speedy.

"I've got to catch a freight train back to Vista Robles," said Rio. "I should have knowed better than to come all the way down here to report a rustlin' job. Wasted time. A hundred head of fat beef—gone."

"Where'd they go?" asked Tombstone.

Rio stared at him for a moment.

"Are you tryin' to be smart?" he asked harshly.

"No," replied Tombstone meekly. "If I was tryin' to be smart, I'd ask yuh who took 'em. What was the circumstances of the disappearance?"

"They was stolen!"

"Oh, they was? Where-at?"

Rio Boggs choked back a suppressed desire to throttle Tombstone. He sighed deeply and turned to Smoky.

"After I'm gone to the depot, got on the train and am half-way to Vista Robles, will you take this gent aside and tell him where my cows were stolen—if it's any of his blasted business?"

Rio Boggs whirled and bow-legged his way toward the depot. Tombstone grinned slowly.

"Well, do yuh still want to know, Tombstone?" Smoky said.

"No-o-o-o, I don't reckon so, Smoky. You spoke about a drink."

In the Silver Star Saloon they met Ed Ferris, buyer for the Silver Queen Mines, where five hundred miners were employed.

"Ed used to was a cowpoke," said Smoky. "Like me, he reformed."

Ferris bought a drink. He wanted to know what outfits they had worked for, where they came from and where were they going.

"They're on a secret mission for the Gov'ment," said Smoky.

"Secret, huh?" queried Ferris.

"So secret," confided Speedy, "that me and Tombstone only knows half the question—me half and him half."

"Well, how can yuh ever ask anybody the question?"

"That," said Tombstone, "is why we stopped here. We wanted a nice, quiet place to figure it out ourselves."

"It sounds crazy to me," declared Ferris.

"Not when yuh know the answer."

"Well, do you know the answer?" asked Ferris quickly.

"Shore." Tombstone nodded soberly. "I've knowed it all the time."

"But—well, if you knowed the answer, why didn't they—"

"Confidentially," said Speedy, "he's such a liar that they didn't believe him. They sent us down here to prove it."

"Huh!" grunted Ferris thoughtfully.

"I can believe part of it—them not believin' him," Smoky said.

"Do you buy beef, Ferris?" asked Tombstone.

Ferris looked curiously at the tall, lean cowpoke.

"With over five hundred men to feed three times a day, what do you think?"

"Have yuh got a contract with anybody?"

"Nope—we buy anywhere. Have you got any to sell, Jones?"

"Not here. Down in Texas I've got—well, I've been away a couple months, and I ain't heard. I'll let yuh know, when m' ranch manager gives me the figures. Speedy, what was the size of my herd the last report we got?"

"Six and seven-eights," replied Speedy.

"I said herd, not head."

Ferris laughed and told them he had to go back to the mine. They went outside and ran into the sheriff.

"I sent a telegram to that crazy agent at Gunsight," he told them. "I want some more information about that attempted train robbery. The agent here hadn't heard a thing about it, except that telegram that Andy Wells sent me. He's trying to find out more from the division superintendent. If he knowed that one man was tall and the other short, he must have somethin' more that'll help us."

"Yeah," said Tombstone soberly," he should."

SPEEDY was worried, and he explained his worry to Tombstone.

"Nobody knows us, nobody saw us at Gunsight. If that blasted agent wants to identify us as the two men who tried to stick up that train, what defense have we

got? The answer is—none."

"Well, I heard—" began Tombstone.

"The jury ain't interested in what yuh heard, Tombstone. They're only interested in what yuh know."

"Well, Jim Keaton can prove we ain't train robbers."

"Can he? How?"

"That's right—he can't. But he can prove we was at Gunsight."

"That'll help us a whole lot. Mebbe they couldn't convict us, but I'd hate to stay in jail a month or two, waitin' for a trial."

"Mebbe we better pull out, Speedy."

"Yeah, and make it look worse'n ever. Anyway, we're half-out of horses and saddles, if you remember."

"Yeah, I can remember that."

Tombstone got into a poker game that evening, simply because he didn't have money enough to make a good play at the roulette wheel. Speedy refused to let him have any of his money. Tombstone wasn't a good poker player, and Speedy figured they were, or soon would be, half-out of money. So Speedy went back to the hotel, sat around for a while and then went up to the post-office to see if that letter from Jim Keaton had arrived. It had. Speedy put it in his pocket and started back to the hotel.

It was quite dark along that particular stretch of sidewalk, and Speedy was about half-way back to the hotel when something struck him over the head. He was walking near the inside of the walk, and someone must have used a pick-handle. At any rate, his consciousness went out in a shower of shooting stars, and he was jerked off the sidewalk.

The next thing he remembered, he was on the sidewalk, doing a very erratic job of locomotion, not understanding why the seas were so heavy, and not exactly caring a whole lot. There was no one in the little hotel lobby, so Speedy managed to get up the stairs, where he considered everything concerned. After due deliberation he managed to remember the location of their room, and reached there eventually.

The dusty mirror showed him hatless, and with a lump the size of a hen's egg over his left ear, a trickle of blood on the side of his face, and very dusty clothes.

"Smith, yo're a mess, if I ever seen one," he said.

His gun was still in his holster, but the letter was gone. Speedy wet a towel and sat down, holding it against his head. Someone had hit him and taken that letter. His mind was still a little hazy when Tombstone came in. Tombstone threw some money on the table and sent his hat spinning over on the bed.

"I won three hundred and sixty dollars!" he exclaimed triumphantly. "I went down to the feed corral, bought two horses, two saddles, and there's seventeen dollars left! And you said I can't play poker."

Speedy didn't say anything. Tombstone sat down and looked at him.

"Lovely dove!" he blurted. "Didja fall down the stairs? Look at that knob! Man, you—what hit yuh?"

"I've been robbed," replied Speedy wearily. "I got that letter from Jim Keaton at the post-office, and some'ers between here and there somebody patted me on the head with a wagon-tongue, and took the letter."

"Yuh did? What'd the letter say?"

"I hadn't opened it," sighed Speedy.

"Mebbe it had money in it, and they knowed it."

"Why would Jim Keaton send us money?" countered Speedy.

"That's right—he wouldn't. Well, I'll be darned. Hit yuh over the head and stole a letter from Jim Keaton! Don't make sense. Mebbe it was somebody that never had a letter."

"Wait a minute!" interrupted Speedy. "Jim Keaton was sendin' us some instructions in that letter. Mebbe . . . Wait a minute! We sent that telegram from Gunsight, and we got the answer there. Jim said he was sendin' us a letter. Yuh know somethin'?" Speedy rubbed his sore head. "I'm goin' back to Gunsight and pistol-whip Andy Wells. He told somebody about that letter, and they've got it."

"I'll betcha that's it, Speedy! Jim Keaton had a important job for us, and now we don't know what it is. What do yuh think about me winnin' some rollin'-stock for us? I drawed four cards to an inside straight?"

"You done what?" asked Speedy. "Drawed four cards to an inside straight?"

"Uh-huh. Big jack-pot, too. Held a ten-spot and got all the rest. And you allus say I can't play poker."

"I take it all back," sighed Speedy. "I'll never again say that you can't play poker. But I will say that you don't even know the first thing about the game. Draw four cards to an inside straight!"

"Well," admitted Tombstone reluctantly, "I will agree that there was a element of luck connected with it. But after this I'll stick to good, old draw poker. Roulette is *all* luck."

"I think," said Speedy soberly, "I'll let you get the mail next time.

CHAPTER IV

Kind and Patient

BY NEXT morning the swelling was down a little, but Speedy was still obliged to wear his hat jauntily on one side of his head, after they found it against the sidewalk, where he had been when he was hit. After breakfast they met Sam Walters, the sheriff.

"This is a good one, boys," Walters said. "That agent, Andy Wells, never reported that attempted robbery to the railroad company. They don't know anythin' about it. Not only that, but Andy Wells wired his resignation yesterday afternoon, and walked off the job, before they could send in a relief man. The company wants me to find Andy Wells."

"What do they want him for?" asked Tombstone.

"They want to know why he reported an attempted holdup to me and not to them."

"Jealous, huh?"

"I suppose so," sighed the sheriff.

"Sheriff," said Speedy, "did Rio Boggs ever have cattle stolen before? I mean, did he complain, before this hundred head was taken?"

"Well, yea-a-ah, he did. Several times. Me and Smoky spent a week up there, but we didn't find nothin'."

"What other spreads are up in that neighborhood?"

"Well, the Broken Fork spread is north of Bogg's place. It ain't a big outfit. Belongs to Tom Sneed. He only hires a couple men—Al Toland and Jerry McLeish. Tom's a fine feller. They don't get down here very often. Do their tradin' at Vista Robles, mostly."

"How do yuh figure on findin' Andy Wells?" asked Speedy.

"Well, I dunno exactly. Andy used to work for Boggs. Mebbe he'll be around Vista Robles, I dunno. He used to be a cowpuncher. I just wondered—you boys not doin' anythin'—I'd send Smoky up there—"

"You want us to go up there with Smoky?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, yeah, kinda. I'd shore like to know more about that attempted train robbery, yuh know. Might try it again, and I'd like to have Andy Wells down here for a little talk. 'Course, I'd deputize you two. Make yoreselves a few dollars. Not much, but more'n yore makin' now."

"Yeah," agreed Speedy," we ain't gettin' rich. We'll go, Sam."

"That's fine. You talk it over with Smoky."

Smoky was more than agreeable over the deal. He didn't want to take that long ride alone.

"This fits in just right," Speedy said to Tombstone. "I'd bet a hundred dollars against a doughnut that Jim Keaton told us in that letter to go see Rio Boggs."

"I'll take the bet," said Tombstone soberly. "It ain't like me to gamble, but them odds are too good to pass up. Why on earth would he ask us to see Rio Boggs?"

"The Association," replied Speedy, "is concerned with cattle thieves, and Rio Boggs has been losin' cows. Yuh don't have to be awful smart to figure things out. Let them pirates have that letter. We don't need it."

"Yeah," agreed Tombstone. "With our brains, we don't need letters."

"With our brains," added Speedy, "we better start gettin' smart."

[*Turn page*]

"To do detectin'?" asked Tombstone.

"No—to keep from gettin' shot. Every rustler in the country knows who we are by this time. Them train robbers has got a mad on against us, and we're goin' to stick our necks right into the lion's den."

"Why, Speedy, how you talk! We're just goin' to try and find the pore, scrawny little Andy Wells."

"Andy Wells never stole them hundred head of cows—but he was in with the train robbers. You heard what they said. Andy Wells is a *mucho malo hombre,* if yuh ask me. He got scared and quit his job."

"We better saddle up them new horses," said Tombstone. "We'll match to see which one we take. Smoky ort to be ready by this time."

The two horses Tombstone had purchased were a tall, mean-looking gray mare and a snake-headed roan. They solemnly flipped a coin, and Tombstone won. He took the gray. They got their saddles and went into the corral, where the roan proceeded to chase Speedy over the fence. He came back to the gate, uncoiling his rope, in time to see Tombstone fling his saddle into the roan's face, and also climb the fence.

"He prob'ly knows yuh held one card and drew a straight," said the skinny Speedy. "I thought you bought two horses, not tigers."

"Watch me out-smart him," said Tombstone.

He shook out his loop, made a long cast and dropped the loop over the roan's head.

HE QUICKLY snubbed the animal to the fence, while Speedy went into the corral, roped the horse from another angle, and tied off the rope. The gray stood there, dumbly watching the show, while Speedy and Tombstone saddled the roan, which now seemed about half-out of fight.

Smoky, riding a bay gelding, came over to the fence.

"Yuh better put glue on that saddle," advised Smoky.

"I drawed him, and I'll ride him," panted Speedy.

The gray never moved a muscle while Tombstone drew the cinch tight. They led the two horses out into the street. Speedy went into the saddle like a cat, and the roan whirled wildly, but never offered to buck. Tombstone chuckled, as he swung up.

"I like 'em kind and patient," he said. "Mebbe they're a little slower, but awful reliable. C'mon, Ol' Man River!"

Tombstone touched the gray with his spurs, and it was just like throwing an electric switch. That slow-looking gray bogged its head, going half as high as the corral fence, and putting on as dizzy an exhibition of plain and fancy bucking as Silverbend had ever seen.

Tombstone, caught off balance, lasted just four jumps, landed standing up in the watering-trough, and threw water all over the place. The gray whirled against the corral fence, stopped and shook itself.

"Kind and patient," remarked Speedy. "Ol' Man River. My, my!"

Tombstone walked back to the gray, leaned against the fence, while he poured the water out of his boots, and told that gray a few things regarding its ancestry. Then he climbed into the saddle, whirled the animal around, socked in the spurs—but nothing happened.

"All cocked and primed, but the trigger stuck," said Speedy. "Yuh can't never tell by the picture on the can. Didn't you know better than to select that gray, Tombstone?"

"How'd I know?"

"Yuh might have found out, like I did. I asked the stable-man. He said, 'The roan is half bluff.' I said, 'What's the gray?' and he said, 'All.'"

"Before we drawed," said Tombstone accusingly, "you said you liked the looks of this gray."

"I did, but I didn't say I wanted him."

"Mebbe I can trade him off to Rio Boggs," said Tombstone.

"Rio, sold him to me," said Smoky. "I turned him over to the stable man, and told him he could have all over fifty dollars."

"Well, you blasted burglars!" exclaimed Tombstone. "I paid him a hundred dollars."

"I know it. He gave me my fifty."

"Who ain't owned him?" asked Tombstone.

"That," replied Smoky," will require some research."

It was late that night when they reached the Circle B. Everybody was in bed except Rio Boggs, who was suffering from toothache. He stood aside as they trooped into the main room of the ranchhouse.

"What have I done to deserve this?" he said.

"You prob'ly ain't lived right," said Smoky. "What's wrong with yore jaw? Horse kick yuh?"

"No, blast yore hide, I'm crazy with the toothache, and there ain't a dentist nor a doctor within more danged miles than I can ride."

"My father was a dentist," said Tombstone

soberly. "I'll see what I can do for yuh, Rio."

"Bein' a dentist ain't hereditary, you knot-head!" snorted Rio.

"It helps. Have yuh got any good, strong pliers around here?"

"You can't pull teeth, Jones."

"How do yuh know I can't?"

"Well, can yuh?"

"How do I know I can't?" said Tombstone soberly.

"Well, you ain't practicin' on my teeth, I'll tell yuh that. What'r you bug-heads doin' over here at this time of night?"

"Have yuh seen anythin' of Andy Wells lately?" asked Smoky.

"Andy Wells? How'd I see him? I never go to Gunsight."

"He ain't there no more. Quit the job—hightailed it."

"Well, ain't a man got a right to quit a job?"

"I reckon so."

"You fellers ain't been drinkin', have yuh?"

"No—have yuh got anythin'?" asked Speedy quickly.

"I have not."

"We ain't gettin' no place," said Tombstone. "Mr. Boggs, have yuh found the hundred head of cows yuh lost?"

"I have not, Mr. Jones. Anythin' else you'd like to ask me?"

"The prosecution rests," chuckled Smoky. "Rio, have yuh got anythin' that three hongry men might eat?"

"The cook's gone to bed—and there's the kitchen. You ain't all cripples, are yuh? Cuss this tooth, anyway!"

"I'd like to pull it for yuh," offered Tombstone. "I've done pulled 'em out of a horse. Take six, seven shots of hard liquor, and out she comes."

"Not with me, yuh don't. Got yore bed-rolls? Spread 'em on the floor in here. I'm goin' upstairs."

AS THEY went to bed that night they could hear Rio Boggs pacing the floor in his high-heel boots, cursing his aching tooth.

"He ain't got nobody but himself to blame," declared Tombstone. "I'd shore like to take it out for him. It's awful simple."

"Not as simple as he'd be to let yuh," said Speedy. "Go to sleep."

It was just getting daylight, when Rio Boggs came part way down the stairs and called softly:

"Jones? Are yuh awake, Jones?"

Tombstone slid out of his blankets and went up the stairs, preceded by Rio, who had difficulty in keeping upright. The smoky oil lamp disclosed about one drink left in a quart bottle. Rio was blind drunk, but suffering. Tombstone wore a sagging union suit, his hair standing up on his head. Rio sat down on the edge of the bed.

"You've gotta pull it," he declared. "I'm goin' crazy."

"Everythin' points thataway," agreed Tombstone, examining the pair of pliers. He yawned and scratched his head, before handing Rio the bottle. "Yuh better finish it," he said. Rio did.

"I wish I was as drunk as you are—this'd be fun," he said.

He tried to prop Rio up in the chair, but he kept sliding out, so he put him on the bed, pulled the table close to the bed, and moved the lamp to a new position. Rio opened his mouth, at Tombstone's suggestion, and tried to point out the offending molar with a stubby finger.

"Agh-h-thug-g-g-ss'n," he said. "Doogle-ugh-fizzoli."

"The same to you, and may they all come true," said Tombstone.

He looked the tooth over critically. It looked bad. Rio closed his mouth and almost bit Tombstone's finger. So he pried the mouth open, got a-straddle of Rio's head, and held it open.

The operation had to be done quickly. He set the pliers around the tooth, twisted hard, hard—and the roots let loose. Then he triumphantly slid off the bed and held up the tooth in the pliers.

"Nobody can ever say that I can't pull teeth," he declared. "That's as clean a job as I ever seen, bar none."

Rio was snoring, so Tombstone padded back down to his bed-roll and crawled in.

Rio didn't come down to breakfast. Hop Lee, the old Chinese cook, let the boys sleep late, before calling them to breakfast. He knew Smoky Falls. The other cowboys had all gone to work. Rio was still in bed, when the boys finished breakfast.

"Leo Blogg plenty sma't," Hop Lee said. "Get ache in tooth, pull him out. I see tooth on table. Sleep good now. Plitty quick all lite. Nice man."

"The old son-of-a-gun!" exclaimed Smoky. "Imagine the nerve of him."

They saddled their horses. Neither the roan nor the gray wanted to act bad this morning. As they swung into the saddles Hop Lee came running down to the corral, waving both arms.

"Yo' go quick!" he panted. "Leo Bloggs

wake up. Plitty mad. He say got to kill somebody—yo' go quick!"

"What's eatin' the old badger now?" asked Smoky. "Who does he want to kill, Hop?"

"He not say. I t'ink the high one. He say he pull w'ong tooth!"

"C'mon," said Tombstone quickly. "No use arguin' with him."

He spurred the gray out past the stable, and the other followed.

"Do you mean to say you pulled his tooth?" asked Speedy.

"I shore did," nodded Tombstone, "and it was the one he pointed at. Why, it's gettin' so yuh can't depend on anybody these days. Mebbe he was too drunk to know which one ached. Well, anyway, he won't have that tooth to worry about later on in life. Some day he'll thank me. "

"Some day he'll shoot yuh," said Smoky.

"If somebody don't beat him to it," said Tombstone dryly.

CHAPTER V

Dynamite!

FOR no particular reason, except that they had to do something, they rode to Gunsight. The new agent didn't know Andy Wells, but didn't blame Andy for leaving the job. It was a lonesome place to live. Tombstone, Speedy and Smoky sat on the old platform and watched a freight train go past.

"Yuh know," said Tombstone, "I've got me a idea."

"It must be repulsive, t' say the least," remarked Smoky. "You had one last night—and pulled the wrong tooth."

"No, it ain't nothin' like that. Yuh know, Speedy, I've been thinkin' about that jasper that shot at us back in that canyon. That was late in the afternoon, and—"

"It was almost dark," corrected Speedy.

"Yeah, it was. Well, yuh could easy steal a cow at Vista Robles and drive it up here in that len'th of time. Mebbe that was Rio Boggs' hundred head."

"Wait a minute!" snorted Smoky. "What's this all about, anyway? You ain't supposed to have been here."

"Listen, my child," said Speedy soberly, "and I will tell thee."

And Speedy proceeded to tell Smoky Falls all about their experience in reaching Gunsight, and what happened there that night. Smoky wasn't inclined to believe all of it, especially about Speedy shooting out the red light and saving the train.

"You read that some'ers," declared Smoky.

"We lived it, feller," declared Speedy.

"Well, why didn't yuh tell the railroad company and git a reward?"

"And have Andy Wells swear that we was the robbers? Not a chance."

"Yeah, I can see that angle. Huh! Heroes in disguise."

"Heroes in disgust," corrected Speedy. "And let me tell yuh how I got that knob on m' head."

"Knob? Why, Tombstone said that was the handle yore folks used to pick yuh up with, when yuh was a child. How'd it happen?"

Speedy had to tell him about the telegrams to Jim Keaton, and the loss of the letter. Smoky marveled openly.

"This whole thing," he said, "would make a awful good story to tell somebody that don't know either one of yuh. Where do we go next?"

"We're goin' back up that canyon and try to find them cows."

"Speedy, yo're crazy—cow-crazy, I'd say."

"Yea-a-ah? Which way is the Broken Fork spread from here?"

Smoky studied the hills, scratched his head thoughtfully, and finally pointed in the general direction, as well as he was able.

"All right," said Tombstone, "that canyon must head within ten miles of the Broken Fork. Prob'ly on their spread. Looks better all the time."

Smoky shook his head. "The Broken Fork are honest men. Tom Sneed ain't no rustler."

"Listen, Smoky," said Speedy soberly, "when the world has picked out the dumbest man they can find, I'll match you agin him, and win hands down. You set there and say he's honest. What proves it?"

"Well," replied Smoky sheepishly, "he ain't never been in jail."

"And that," said Tombstone, "don't prove anythin'. With the present officers in the office at Silverbend, and if Bluebeard lived there, he could kill forty more wives and you wouldn't know it."

"Not even if they yelled all together," added Speedy.

"All right, all right," growled Smoky. "We'll look at yore canyon."

"You ain't so hard to convince, after all," said Speedy. "I thought you'd be stubborn."

They left Gunsight and headed for the canyon, which was easy to find, as was the old trail, but the rain had washed out all tracks of cattle and horses. Smoky was still unbelieving. They showed him where they were forced to climb to higher ground, but there was nothing to show him that they were not still lying.

The old trail led to the top, where a long mesa stretched in every direction. They finally found a trail, which had been cut up with cattle tracks, and followed it. Smoky had no idea which direction was toward the Broken Fork. An overcast sky had ruined their ideas of direction, so they just kept on riding.

"We can't go back to the Boggs ranch," said Smoky. "Ol' Rio would massacree all of us. It kinda looks like a dry camp for tonight."

IT WAS getting rather late, when they rode out along a brushy point, where they stopped and dismounted, to try and get their bearings. The land sloped sharply below them, and they could see the outlines of an old abandoned shaft-house. Smoky grew a bit enthusiastic.

"That's the old Gray Ghost Mine!" he exclaimed. "It ain't been worked for twenty-five years. I know where we are now."

"Where?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, we're right here," replied Smoky. "That old mine is about ten miles from the Broken Fork ranchhouse."

"Which way?" asked Speedy.

"That," admitted Smoky, "is a problem. I'll be darned if I just know. Wait a minute! There used to be a old road that went past the Broken Fork, and down through Soledad Canyon, and—I ain't shore, but I think it came out some'ers around where the Silver Queen Mine is now. Mebbe we can find that road."

"Hold fast!" exclaimed Tombstone. "There's a rider down there. He's behind that big patch of mesquite now. Watch on that right-hand side. There he is, leadin' his horse."

"There's a shack down there!" exclaimed Speedy quietly. "See it?"

"That's where he's a-headin' for," said Smoky. "Yuh can see the front and one side. Who do yuh reckon he is?"

"He's stopped and is lookin' around," said Speedy. "Now he's goin'."

"I'll betcha he's seen us," said Tombstone. "Watch that hombre."

The man led his horse around behind the house, where he left it. He came around to the front and stood there, looking all around, for a matter of minutes, before he went into the house and closed the door.

He wasn't in there very long, but appeared at the back of the place, where he seemed to be scrutinizing the surroundings carefully. Finally he led his horse away down through the brush, where he mounted in the heavy cover and rode swiftly away down a trail.

"And that," declared Tombstone, "ain't normal."

They mounted and rode down to the old shack. It was a very old one-room house, and Smoky said he believed it had been built by an old wolfer, who trapped in there for years. Speedy started to go up to the front door, but Tombstone stopped him.

"Ain't I never learned yuh to not do that?" he asked. "Be shore yo're right, before yuh open a front door. C'mon."

They went around to the rear. There was another door and a muchly-patched window. The back door was locked with a padlock. Tombstone tested the window, twisted a couple of crooked nails aside, and took the whole thing out. Then he pulled himself up, went in head-first and pulled his feet after him. The other two looked through the window, as Tombstone lighted a candle.

"Well, we won't starve!" he called to them. "Plenty food."

"Unfasten that front door, will yuh?" asked Speedy.

Speedy and Smoky went around to the front. Tombstone was mumbling to himself, but finally opened the old door.

"It wasn't locked," he said quietly, as the door swung outward.

"Why'd he lock the back door?" asked Speedy.

"Here's why," replied Tombstone. "See that little wire? It was wound around that nail on the door. Open the door—pull the wire."

"What'd that do?" asked Smoky curiously.

Tombstone was down on his knees, easing away a piece of the old flooring, following the small wire, which ended up in the top of a fifty-pound box of high percentage dynamite. An old single-action six-shooter had been wired tightly, cocked and pointing into a box of detonators. The small wire was wrapped around the trigger of the gun.

"Lovely dove!" breathed Speedy. "One yank on that door—a nice evenin' to you, Saint Peter! Why, that fifty pounds of dynamite would have moved this layout

plumb to Nevady."

Tombstone smiled grimly. "And that dirty killer is some'ers down the mesa, listenin' for our demise. If he don't hear no blast, he'll figure we didn't find the place. Mebbeso he'll come back."

"Yea-a-ah," breathed Speedy," and get the drop on us. I'm outside, if anybody wants me."

THEY closed the door and went to their horses, leading them back into the brush, where they loosened the saddles, and moved back quietly, with their bed-rolls. Tombstone went into the house, secured three cans of baked beans, and came back.

"Dynamite don't hurt my appetite," he told them.

They sprawled on their bed-rolls and ate the beans. After an hour or so they went to bed, but the man never came back.

After daylight Tombstone and Speedy searched the old shack, while Smoky kept watch, but there was nothing to indicate ownership. They took enough food for breakfast, got their weary horses and rode up to the old shaft-house, a half-mile away, where they ate their meal.

There was little left of the old shaft-house, but they found unmistakable evidence that butchering had been done there, and recently. There were many burro tracks around the outside, tracks of high-heeled boots, cigarette butts, and the rim of the old, two-hundred-and-fifty-foot shaft showed that it had been made the receptacle of all the offal.

Smoky sat down and studied the situation, but it was beyond him.

"I figure it thisaway," said Speedy. "Somebody stole cows, butchered 'em here and packed the meat on burros. Where they went, we've got to find out. Whose cows—*quien sabe*? The hides are two hundred and fifty feet down, if yore estimate of depth is correct."

"I reckon I'm right as to depth," said Smoky.

"All right," said Tombstone, "we'll hit that old road. That'll show the burro tracks. Foller 'em to the bitter end—and there yuh are."

They found the old road, but there were no burro tracks. For two miles they followed it, but nary a track.

"A right good idea busted," sighed Tombstone. "Yuh say this road leads to the Broken Fork ranchhouse, Smoky?"

"I think it does, or awful close."

"Yo're a swell guide," remarked Speedy. "We'll prob'ly end up in Philadelphia. Is there a road from the Broken Fork to Rio Boggs' place?"

"No, there ain't, but I can find my way to the Circle B."

"Do yuh suppose yuh can find it for all three of us?" asked Tombstone. "We'd like to go along, yuh know."

"Glad to have yuh. Mebbe we better pick a few flowers along the way, in case Rio Boggs gets a good shot at yuh."

"Aw, he's forgot that tooth by this time. Anyway, I ain't scared of the little sidewinder. If he monkeys with me, I'll pull 'em all out."

CHAPTER VI

Vista Robles

WHEN they found the Broken Fork ranchhouse, it was past noontime. There was no one at home, except the pot-bellied old cook, who looked them over sadly. He was a frowsy old rannahan, badly in need of a haircut and some clean clothes.

"Hyah, Misery," greeted Smoky. "How are yuh, you old ground hawg?"

"Purty good," replied "Misery" asthmatically. "What you doin' up in this part of the world, Smoky?"

"Oh, just lookin' things over. Miller, this is Jones and Smith."

Misery Miller looked them over and nodded.

"There is things that cain't be helped," he said huskily.

"Where's Tom, Misery?"

"Tom? I dunno. Said he might go to Silverbend. I dunno."

"Al and Jerry with him?"

"No-o-o. They're gone some'ers."

Misery made vague gestures, which covered a lot of country.

"Are yuh headin' back for Silverbend?" he asked.

"Might be." Smoky nodded. "Ain't there a old road that leads down thataway from here?"

"Yeah, kinda. Washed out years ago. Yuh can foller it almost down to the Silver Queen. If yuh know the trail, yuh can make it. Hongry?"

"That's right, Misery. Got any grain for the horses?"

"Help yourself down at the stable. I'll rustle yuh a snack."

They fed their hungry horses and went back to the house. Misery's kitchen was almost as dirty as his person, but the food was good. As they ate their meal, Misery squatted in the kitchen doorway, smoking his pipe.

"Where-at did you fellers come from?" he asked.

"Well," replied Tombstone, "we've been kinda in a circle. Last night we slept at the old Gray Ghost Mine."

Misery took his pipe from his mouth and stared at it for a moment.

"There—uh—ain't no place to sleep up there."

"That shaft-house is kinda dirty," admitted Tombstone, "but it kept the wind off us."

"The—uh—shaft-house. All fallen in, ain't it?"

"No, it's pretty good yet. Needs cleanin' up. Don't smell good. Misery, who owns a pack-train of burros around here?"

"Burros? I dunno. Who'd use burros?"

"The kind that don't make tracks in the road."

"Kind that don't . . . Hu-u-uh?" Misery stared at Tombstone. "I dunno what yuh mean."

Misery got up with visible effort, because of his paunch, and filled their cups with coffee.

"Be back in a few minutes," he said huskily, and went down across the yard toward the stable.

Smoky stared at Tombstone.

"What's the idea of sayin' things like that to him?" he asked.

"What would he know about it?" added Speedy.

"That's what I wondered," replied Tombstone, moving his chair back. "He must know somethin' about that old shaft-house. He said there wasn't any place to sleep up there."

"Yeah," said Speedy. "Yeah, he did, didn't he? Huh!"

Tombstone stepped over to the one window and looked out, as he rolled a cigarette. The other two finished their coffee. Tombstone finally came back and sat down, after filling his cup again.

"Tastes like stewed gunny-sack," he said, "but I like it."

Smoky yawned and reached for his tobacco.

"Which way is Vista Robles from here, Smoky?" Tombstone said. "Down that way?"

Tombstone pointed toward the back of the kitchen. Smoky looked, got up and stepped outside.

"That's right," he said. "How'd you know?"

"I thought it might be. That's the way Misery Miller went."

SMOKY'S jaw sagged.

"Mu-Misery Miller?" he asked. "Why, he ain't gone, is he?"

"Yeah. He circled away from the stable, hit the brush, but headed that way. I just had a hunch he was goin' to Vista Robles."

"He saddled a horse?" asked Speedy.

"Or had it saddled already." Tombstone nodded. "He shore high-tailed it out of here. Mebbe I made him nervous."

"Well, I'll be Chinaman's great-aunt!" snorted Smoky. "You ask him some crazy—no, yuh didn't ask him, yuh told him crazy things. And off he goes, leavin' us here. It don't make sense, any way yuh look at it."

"He's prob'ly a sensitive soul," said Tombstone. "Jist can't bear to listen."

"But what's he headin' for Vista Robles for?" asked Smoky.

"Prob'ly goin' to call out the militia," said Speedy. "Mebbe he thinks Tombstone is crazy and needs a keeper."

"And again"—Tombstone smiled—"mebbe he thinks we know so much that he'd better warn the rest of the world to look out for us. If yuh don't mind, gents, I think we better head for Vista Robles."

"We can't make it by dark," said Speedy. "It's a long ways."

"The darker the better," said Tombstone soberly. "And we better not ride in a bunch either. I don't think Misery Miller went down to get a brass band to greet us at Vista Robles."

Darkness came when they were only halfway to Vista Robles. That rutty old road seemed to wind all over the landscape. An hour later they strung out in single-file, traveling as fast as possible, but it was after nine o'clock before they saw the few lights of Vista Robles.

Quietly they swung off the road and circled the little town, coming to a halt in the deep shadows of some cottonwoods, about two hundred yards from the main part of town.

"Just what do we do here?" asked Smoky. "You ain't said."

"I don't know," replied Tombstone. "We've got to find Misery Miller—if he's here. Yuh must figure out that he didn't come here just for a ride. Somethin' is on foot."

"I hope it won't be us," said Speedy. "We

was on foot once."

"We'll split up and make a search," said Tombstone. "Smoky, you take a look at this side of the street. The store is still open. I'll check up on the saloon and around there, and Speedy will Injun around the depot. Then we'll meet at the right-hand end of the depot. I'll check on the hitchrack at the saloon. Let's go."

Rio Boggs came to Vista Robles about seven o'clock that evening. He was nursing a swollen jaw, a hangover, and his usual dreary outlook on life in general. He had made his mind up to get on the first passenger train, no matter which way it was going, and find some town where there was a dentist.

Rio hadn't had more than five or six drinks, when in walked Sam Walters, the sheriff, dusty and tired. Rio greeted him with a bellow.

"Where's that half-witted deputy of yours and his ignorant pardners?" he demanded.

Sam Walters looked Rio over critically.

"Which one of 'em kicked yuh on the jaw, Rio?" he said.

"They ain't men enough to kick me on the jaw, Walters. If I find that long-geared Jones, I'll cut his throat from ear to ear!"

"If you'll shut up long enough to swaller, I'll buy yuh a drink."

"Well, yeah I can, shore. But if yore tooth ached like mine—"

"Why don't yuh get it pulled?"

"Pulled? Where? That's why I'm here. Got to take a train to a dentist!"

"If I had some pliers—" began the sheriff, but Rio exploded.

"You, too, eh? Pliers. Look at this. Mulffigzz uggle zugg-ff."

Rio shoved a finger in his mouth and explained fluently.

"Eskimo, if I ever heard it spoke," the bartender said.

"The tooth is out," said the sheriff.

"A good one is out, yuh mean! That blasted, long-legged, half-witted, limber-jawed—"

"Yuh mean Jones pulled the wrong tooth?" asked the sheriff.

"The best tooth I had! If I ever find him—"

"Didn't yuh show him which one, Rio?"

Rio sighed deeply. "I—I don't remember. Sam, I drank a whole quart, tryin' to kill the pain. When I woke up, my good tooth was gone."

"And so was Jones, huh?" queried the sheriff.

"Did he take the tooth?" asked the bartender.

RIO downed his drink and leaned his elbows on the bar.

"What'r you doin' up here, Sam?" he asked.

"Oh, I just rode over to look around. Where'd Smoky and the others go, after they left yore place?"

"I dunno. Hop Lee said they went toward Gunsight. If it hadn't been for that peace-lovin' Chinee, I'd have massacreed Jones."

Sam Walters leaned on the bar and squinted at the fly-specked mirror over the backbar.

"Zeke," he said to the bartender, "you ain't seen Andy Wells around here, have yuh?"

"No I ain't, Sam."

"For gosh sake, what's that shrimp done?" grunted Rio Boggs. "Smoky and his cannibals asked the same question. You'd think he was wanted for murder—or is he?"

The sheriff shook his head. "No charge, Rio. I just want to talk with him."

"That's punishment enough f'r one man to stand. I'd almost as soon have a toothache. Fill 'em up, Alex. My train won't be here for quite a while. Yuh don't know where Jones is, huh?"

"He's with Smoky, wherever Smoky is—which I don't know. Well, here's hopin' the next tooth out will be the right one."

"I hope so. If it ain't, I'll be mumblin' m' food for a long time."

As they put down their glasses Misery Miller walked in. He had no coat, wore an old pair of slippers, and the hat he wore didn't fit him. He had picked it up in the stable on his hurried departure. He saw the sheriff, hesitated, but came on up to the bar.

"Howdy, Misery," said the sheriff. "You look like yuh went off half-cocked."

"When Misery gets dry," said Rio, "he don't stop to dress."

"Ain't that true?" added the bartender. "I 'member one time that Misery was here two days, drinkin' straight whisky, and all he had on was his boots, drawers and a slicker. And it was a hundred and ten in the shade. A thirst like that is a awful thing."

Misery grinned with evident relief. Being eccentric has its advantages. Rio bought a drink.

"How's Tom and the boys?" asked the sheriff.

"They're fine. I git lonesome for a drink once in a while. Fill 'em up, Zeke."

"Smoky and the two fellers with him ain't been up to the Broken Fork, have they?" asked the sheriff.

Misery shook his head. "I ain't seen nobody, Sam."

"Prob'ly lost," said Rio. "Hope so, anyway."

"You ain't seen Andy Wells, have yuh Misery?"

"Andy Wells? No, I—I ain't, Sam. You lookin' for Andy?"

"He jist wants to talk to him, Misery," said Rio. "That's the latest form of punishment inaugurated by the sheriff's office in Silverbend. There ort to be a law agin it."

"What's Andy done?" asked Misery.

"I'd like to know the answer to that one m'self," said the sheriff.

CHAPTER VII

Plotters

SPEEDY SMITH wasn't having much luck with his part of the search. He worked his way around behind the store, reached the corner, where he peered into a corner of a front window. Two or three men were in there, but no Misery Miller. As Speedy sagged back off the wooden walk, a gun was jabbed into his back.

"Back up and keep yore hands high, hombre!" a voice whispered.

"Shore," whispered Speedy. "Comin' back."

Speedy started slow, but went into high-gear suddenly. He kicked back, trying to locate a shin-bone, twisted away from the gun, but his kick was wide, and the next thing his lights went out in a shower of stars. The man picked Speedy up in his arms and went staggering away in the darkness.

Tombstone Jones was having a little better luck. He located the hitchrack, where he was able to look over the three horses. One was the sweat-coated black that Misery Miller had ridden from the Broken Fork. The sorrel belonged to Sam Walters, the sheriff of Silverbend, and the hammer-headed buckskin was the same horse that Tombstone had seen at the Circle B, belonging to Rio Boggs.

"Misery Miller, Sam Walters and Rio Boggs," muttered Tombstone. "Huh!"

He saw Misery Miller come from the saloon, heading down the small sidewalk to the hitchrack. Tombstone crouched behind the sheriff's horse, which was at the end of the rack. Misery stepped off the end of the walk.

"Misery!" a voice called quietly from the heavy shadows beside the saloon.

The Broken Fork cook stopped short, looking in that direction. The voice called a name, which Tombstone couldn't hear, and the old cook walked quickly into the shadow. Tombstone listened closely. The two men were talking, too quietly for him to hear much, although he did hear them mention Smoky and Walters. Then he heard a voice say:

"We know it—we got one of 'em."

Then the two men moved away together. Tombstone tried to figure out what this was all about. Was it another attempted train robbery, he wondered? He went over and managed to look into the saloon. Rio Boggs, Sam Walters and the bartender were playing three-handed poker.

The whole thing was very puzzling to the tall cowboy. Something was going on in Vista Robles, but the sheriff didn't know it. Misery had thrown all caution to the winds and headed for Vista Robles to warn somebody. Warn them of what? Warn them that their butchering spot had been uncovered? If so, why were they in Vista Robles? It didn't make sense.

Tombstone drifted out behind the saloon, out in the direction taken by Misery Miller and the other man. There was an old corral out there, partly fallen down, but no buildings. He could see a darker mass beyond, which might mean buildings, but it proved to be only a grove of cottonwoods, and two walls of an old adobe. He sat down to think some more, and heard a horse paw the ground.

Pushing cautiously through the brush he found the horses, tied deep in among the trees. Seven saddled horses.

"Seven," muttered Tombstone. "Only three men at the Broken Fork. It looks kinda funny."

Then he made another discovery. One of the horses was the one which had been stolen from him at Gunsight. It was his saddle, too. Seven horses, all saddled. Hidden away in the brush, too. That meant dirty work of some kind.

"You'll walk home, if yuh don't mind," he muttered, and proceeded to untie six of the animals, tied up the tie-ropes, and

let the animals loose.

They were willing to drift. He kept his own horse, moving it to another spot, a hundred yards away.

"If somethin' pops," he declared, "somebody is goin' to be headin' away from here on foot."

IN THE meantime Smoky Falls was being very cautious. He had circled the depot twice. He had crouched for a long time against a pile of old railroad ties, but heard nothing, saw nothing. It was plainly evident to Smoky that everything was normal around the Vista Robles depot. The depot office was lighted, and once he saw the agent come outside.

Smoky wanted a cigarette, so he made his way back to the depot platform where Tombstone had told the other two to meet him, sat down and rolled a smoke. They should be coming along shortly. He lighted the cigarette and relaxed, wondering what had become of Misery Miller, and why he had run out on them. Queer thing to do.

A man came quietly around the corner of the platform, ten feet away.

"Everythin' is quiet around here, Speedy," said Smoky. "Find out anythin'?"

It wasn't Speedy. The muzzle of a double-barrel shotgun prodded into Smoky Falls' waist-line.

"Slide off there and shut up!" a husky voice said.

Smoky slid—and he didn't make any remarks. A deft hand removed his gun from the holster, and the man prodded him in the back.

"Get goin'," he whispered. "And if you make one fool move, you'll get it."

"I won't," assured Smoky. "You do the guidin'."

"Straight ahead—and shut up."

The two men disappeared in the darkness, leaving everything serene around the depot again.

Not far away, Tombstone leaned on the hitchrack in the deep shadows and watched a long freight train pass through Vista Robles. When the caboose rattled out of sight down through the mesquite, Tombstone decided to keep his tryst with Smoky and Speedy.

At least he could tell them that the Broken Fork cook had contacted somebody, and that he had found seven horses, including his own. Also, that Rio Boggs and Sam Walters were in the saloon, playing poker with the bartender. Tombstone wished he was, too. Poker was more fun than playing hide-and-seek with danger.

Tombstone circled the depot, keeping far away from any lights, but saw nothing of Speedy and Smoky. They were certainly not where he had told them to meet him. He went back to the street and circled the general store. It was all very peculiar.

Over in the saloon the three men hunched over the poker table. There had been little conversation. The snapping of a card, the rattle of poker-chips was about the only sound.

"What the devil became of Misery?" Sam Walters said finally.

"Yeah," said the bartender. "Three off the top, Rio."

"He said he was goin' to stable his horse," remarked the sheriff. "Been gone almost an hour. Wonder what happened to the old soak. Fell down and can't get up, I wonder? Give me one, Rio. How's the tooth?"

"Never mind the tooth," growled the old cowman. "Easin' up a little. Nobody opened it? I can't. Ain't had openers since Sittin' Bull stood up. Wonder if it's pretty near train time? I've got to take a trip—if this tooth don't stop achin'. Cuss that long-geared, gimlet-eyed Jones. Got m' head between his knees and yanked out a good tooth."

"Too bad he didn't pull all of 'em," said the bartender. "I hate to hear anybody braggin' about bein' in pain. I've done my share of sufferin', but I done her in silence."

"You ain't got brains enough to know where yuh ache, Zeke. Takes a smart man to suffer properly. Get the bottle, will yuh? I need help."

"And the Law takes the pot on three aces," declared the sheriff a few minutes later. "I wonder where Misery Miller went. Do yuh reckon we ought to go out and find the old rannahan?"

"Not me," declared the bartender. "If he never come back, I'll give three cheers. He's a darned pest. Spends a week down here, pourin' whisky down into his bottomless pit, and singin' songs."

"I didn't know he could sing," said Rio.

"He darned well can't! Does it, anyway. Pass."

"Have yuh heard anythin' about yore missin' cows, Rio?" asked the sheriff absently.

"Didja think they'd send me a postal card?"

Misery Miller came back and leaned against the bar. The sheriff looked him over curiously. Draped around his waist, almost hidden by his pot belly, was a gun-belt, holding a holstered gun. The sheriff knew that Misery had not been wearing any gun

before. And there was something familiar about that gun butt.

ZEKE got up and poured a drink for Misery, who turned to the bar, giving the sheriff a good view of that gun-butt. The sheriff rubbed his shin thoughtfully. Misery Miller was wearing Smoky Falls' gun! That gun was Smoky's most precious possession. He wouldn't sell it to anybody at any price. The sheriff lost interest in the poker game.

Rio Boggs took another stiff drink of raw whisky, spilled all his poker chips on the floor and kicked them aside with his foot.

"Gotta git a train pretty shoon," he announced. "Goin' shome place."

"I reckon the game's closed, Zeke," said the sheriff.

Zeke picked up all the chips, cashed them in, and shoved the money into Rio's pocket.

"'F yuh shee Jones, lemme know, will yuh?" asked Rio drowsily.

"I'd shore like to see him," said the sheriff grimly. "I'd kinda like to see Smoky, too."

Misery Miller paid no attention to the sheriff's wants.

"That's pretty good liquor, Zeke," he said. "Fill 'er up agin. . . ."

Outside of the saloon, down at the depot, Tombstone Jones circled the saloon again and cautiously made his way up to the depot, but the rear platform was still empty. There was no doubt in his mind that something had happened to Speedy and Smoky, or they'd have been there before this. Tombstone crouched in the shadow, wondering what to do next.

About a hundred yards up the track was an old tool house, used by the section crew. It was barely visible—a black spot in the night. Tombstone decided not to overlook anything, and that tool house seemed about the only thing he hadn't investigated.

Traveling carefully, he made his way around below the old shanty, where he stopped for a while, watching the place. Then he saw a man come out—just a moving blur in the darkness. Watching closely, he saw the man go back in a few moments. At least, there was someone in the tool house.

Tombstone circled around to the back and crawled the last hundred feet to the rear of the house. It was not a big place; possibly a dozen feet wide and fifteen feet long. He edged in against the rear and listened closely. After a while he was sure he could hear muffled voices, but was unable to hear what was said. There were no windows in the place, and the walls were fairly thick.

After a long wait he heard more low voices, but they were outside now. At first it was difficult to understand what they said, but their voices were higher now.

"Like I said, we've got to be careful," a voice said. "We ain't goin' to lose this chance, 'cause we'll never have another. If what Misery says is true, the whole deal is busted up, and we'll have to scatter. But it'll be worth it."

"Yeah, all right," said another voice nervously. "Let's get this all straight. Four of us scatter out. One goes to the horses and brings 'em in behind the saloon. One watches the front of the saloon, another the front of the store, and one to the rear of the store. If anythin' starts, we start shootin'. You pull the job, head for the horses, and away we go. Am I right?"

"That's right. In less than ten minutes the train will be here. I'll handle my end of the deal. Don't forget that Jones is somewhere in town. Misery can handle the sheriff, when things bust. All set? Let's go—but take it easy. We've got time. Don't make any move until I give the signal."

Tombstone was unable to recognize any of the voices. The five men melted away in the darkness, headed for the main street.

"This don't look like a train robbery," declared Tombstone to himself. "One man pulls the job, while four men block anybody from interferin'. That's awful queer. Mebbe we better look in on the deal."

CHAPTER VIII

Double Roundup

MOVING past the old tool house, Tombstone headed for the depot, plainly visible, with its lighted front. But the tall cowboy had not lost his caution. These men were dangerous, and they were intending to pull a big job of some kind, something that they had said was worth it.

Tombstone reached the end of the platform, where he had agreed to meet Speedy and Smoky. He could see the lighted front of the saloon from there. As he crouched there he heard the far-away wail of a locomotive whistle. The train was coming—and some sort of a trap was set.

Again the long station whistle wailed, and a moment later the powerful headlight of the big locomotive bathed the depot and tracks with light. Tombstone had leaped to the platform and in against the wall of the depot, shielding himself from the rays from the engine. He did not see anybody.

The big Limited ground to a stop at the depot, lights gleaming from every coach. It only stopped for a moment then went on, slowly gaining momentum. A single figure came through the depot—a man, carrying a heavy valise. He halted, looking toward the lighted saloon, as though expecting someone. The train was gone now, its tail-lights bobbing up the track.

Out from the shadow of the depot came another man, walking swiftly. He went up to the man with the valise. Tombstone was fifty feet away. He didn't see exactly what happened, but the man cried out, there was a sudden movement of the two men, and the sound of a solid blow.

Then one man went down like a pole-axed steer, and the other man had picked up the valise, backing away from the figure on the platform. Then he whirled and started walking fast.

Tombstone leaped off the platform and yelled at the man:

"Hold it, pardner!"

The man with the valise whirled and shot at Tombstone, but the bullet went high, smacking into the depot wall. From down toward the saloon came a strident yell:

"Look out! Our horses are gone!"

The man shot once more in Tombstone's direction, turned and started to run. Tombstone, braced against the high platform, fired once, twice. He was shooting by instinct instead of taking deliberate aim, because of the darkness. The man stumbled, fell to his knees, but got up and went on, leaving the valise on the ground. He was running drunkenly.

From down at the saloon came the thud of a shot. One man was running to intercept the man Tombstone was after. Tombstone slowed.

"Are yuh all right?" the man panted. "Where's the valise?"

Tombstone couldn't hear the reply, but he saw the man fall again, and the one who had intercepted him, swearing bitterly, came toward Tombstone, who dropped flat. The fellow shot once, and the gravel drilled holes in Tombstone's big hat, but Tombstone fired once and the man yelped painfully, went to his knees and tried to crawl away.

"You'll stay hitched, my friend!" panted Tombstone, and went running down the street.

Guns were flashing down there, too. A man was trying to untie a horse at the hitchrack, as Tombstone came running.

"Cuss 'em, they got our horses!" he blurted. "I'm pullin' out! Better get a horse, while the gettin' is good."

"Yeah!" panted Tombstone, and dived into the man.

They went down, almost under Rio Boggs' horse, which busted its tie rope and went out of there in a hurry. Tombstone didn't waste any time in trying to subdue the man. He swung the barrel of his six-shooter in a short arc, and the man collapsed.

"There goes my horse!" yelled Rio Boggs. "Them sons-of-guns!"

"What the devil is it all about, Sam?" wailed the bartender. All of them were out on the sidewalk.

"Don't ask me!" snapped the sheriff. "When Misery pulled that gun, I got him. Blast his old hide, he was wearin' Smoky's gun. And that fool, Andy Wells—tryin' to make a pass at me with a gun. I'll betcha he's through makin' gun plays at officers. Don't ask me why they done it. I'm just as . . . Oh-oh! Who's this?"

IT WAS Tombstone Jones, dusty, panting, stepping into the light from the saloon windows.

"I might have knowed he'd be around!" Rio blurted. "Jones, you blasted—"

"Shut up, Rio!" snapped the sheriff. "What's the trouble, Tombstone?"

"I don't know," admitted Tombstone foolishly. "I shot two men and gun-patted another. How many you got, Sam?"

"I got two," replied the sheriff, "and I don't know why."

"Four men shot and one with a busted head, and nobody knows why they done it!" howled Rio.

"Shut up, Rio," advised Zeke. "We'll find out."

"Where's Smoky and Speedy?" asked the sheriff.

"I ain't shore, Sam, but I think I can find 'em now. C'mon."

The four of them went up toward the depot, where they found the two men Tombstone had downed. One man didn't need a doctor. The sheriff lighted a match and looked at him.

"Ed Ferris!" he blurted. "Why—why, I'll be darned! Why, Ed's with the Silver Queen Mine. Who's the other one?"

The other one was Tom Sneed, owner of

the Broken Fork, alive, but unable to navigate. He glared at them and cursed bitterly.

"Tombstone, what happened?" asked the sheriff pleadingly.

"There's another one over here," replied Tombstone, "but Ferris was the one who hit him. That started the trouble. This feller got off the train, and Ferris jumped him."

They found the man, crumpled on the platform. He had been hit quite hard, and his head was bleeding.

"I never seen him in my life before," declared the sheriff. "What a mess! Why did Ferris hit him, Tombstone? How'd you get over the head and put me in here. What happened—all that shootin'?"

"I got hooked at the depot," wailed Smoky. "Thought it was Speedy, and it was a man with a shotgun. Lordy, am I glad to see yuh! Sam, where on earth did you come from?"

"How many did you get, Tombstone?" asked Speedy, not waiting for any answers. "Or did they get away—as I expected?"

"They didn't," said Tombstone with great finality.

"Didn't they get the money?" asked Graves huskily, rubbing his sore jaw.

"What money?" asked the sheriff.

"THIS IS A HOLDUP, GENTS! GET OUT AND GIVE ME THAT RIG—OR YOUR LIVES!"

THE Red Mask had the drop on the fellows in the buckboard, all right—but just at that moment Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith came along and saw what was happening.

"Holdup!" snorted Tombstone. "Can yuh imagine that?"

As if these words were a signal, guns flamed in the cowtown street. There was a rapid, confusing battle, and when it was over the Red Mask had disappeared and the buckboard and its riders were in an inextricable tangle. And Tombstone was sitting up on the ground, holding his head in both hands.

"I dunno where I got it," said Tombstone, "but I feel like he blowed my legs right from under me. Ruint for life—an' me right in m' prime."

He got to his feet, and Speedy reminded him: "You ain't lost no legs. You're standin' up."

"Maybe it's m' head," considered Tombstone.

"A man was shot in the street," shouted someone in the crowd.

"I'm the man that was shot," insisted Tombstone.

Investigation proved that the heel of Tombstone's right boot had been shot out from under him—and no other damage done! And that's the kind of luck Tombstone has in COYOTE LUCK FOR TOMBSTONE—one of the most entertaining yarns W. C. Tuttle has ever written! This rollicking novelet is in the next issue—look forward to it!

into the battle? What in the devil does it all mean? Two men try to gun me! Why?"

"I never was no good on answers," replied Tombstone. "It just seemed to work out that way."

"Yo're awful dumb," said Rio. "Do you go around killin' folks, and don't know why."

"It—it kinda looks thataway, Rio. Lemme think. Oh, yeah! C'mon."

Tombstone started at a dog-trot, and the others followed him. He led them straight to the tool house, where he opened the door. In that small room were Speedy, Smoky and a man named Frank Graves, one of the officials at the Silver Queen. All three were well-tied and gagged.

Tombstone held matches, while the sheriff released the three men. None of them had been injured, but they were all plenty mad. Speedy was the first to get his vocal cords in action.

"Blasted thieves!" he blurted. "They hit me

"The pay-roll of the Silver Queen. I came here to meet the man who was bringing it. They caught me and put me here. They were going to take it away from him. Where is it?"

The sheriff turned to Tombstone. "Did you see any money?"

"Money? Wait a minute. By golly, I'll bet—"

Tombstone was running toward the depot.

"How much money, Graves?" the sheriff said.

"Over sixty thousand in currency, that's all, Sheriff."

"Sixty thousand!" exclaimed Rio.

"And Ed Ferris knew it was comin' here," said the sheriff.

"Ed Ferris?" queried Graves. "Why Ed Ferris, Sheriff?"

"Ferris knocked down the man with a valise, Graves. But Ferris is dead."

"Why, the dirty crook!" gasped Graves.

"He tried to steal it?"

"Yuh can't blame him," said Speedy. "That's a temptation."

TOMBSTONE came back, lugging the valise, and they took it to the depot. It was intact, full of currency. The sheriff turned it over to Graves.

"If anybody gets credit for this, it's Tombstone Jones, Graves," he said.

"I am sure that the Silver Queen will not forget Mr. Jones," said Graves.

They took Tom Sneed down to the saloon. He was badly hurt, but also profuse in his profanity, when accused of attempted robbery.

"Yuh see, Sneed," said Tombstone, "it didn't do anybody any good for Misery Miller to ride down here. He only piled the deadwood on yore outfit for stealin' Rio Boggs' cows."

"Stealin' my cows?" roared Rio. "Tom Sneed stole 'em?"

"Shore. They butchered 'em at the old Gray Ghost Mine, throwed the hides and all into the old shaft, and sold the meat to Ferris. What I want to know, Sneed, is how yuh packed 'em on burros and never showed any tracks."

"All right, smart feller!" snarled Sneed. "As long as you know the rest, we bound their feet in burlap. Satisfied?"

"Yeah, perfectly." Tombstone grinned. "The rest of it was a blind guess, but you proved it."

"Well, I'll be a toad's uncle!" snorted Rio Boggs. "Tom Sneed stole my cows. Why, Tom, yo're the last man I'd ever thought of!"

"How's yore tooth?" asked Tombstone.

"Tooth?" Rio stared at Tombstone. "Oh, yeah. Well, dog my cats, it's done hurtin'. I reckon I got it shocked loose. Tall feller, yo're the worst dentist on earth, but it's all right."

"I ain't the worst," denied Tombstone. "All I need is practice. As long as we're talkin'—Sneed, who tried to stick up the train that night at Gunsight? Andy won't mind if yuh tell. Yuh see, he tried to throw down on the sheriff tonight, so he's through."

"Make yore best guess," snarled Sneed. "It might be a good one."

"I'm a good guesser." Tombstone smiled. "Rio, did you send to the Association, askin' 'em to send a detective?"

"I don't even belong to the Association," replied Rio. "They ain't never had a detective that was worth his salt, and they never will."

"That is prob'ly awful true," sighed Speedy.

"I almost forgot," said the sheriff. "A telegram came for you yesterday, Tombstone. I brought it along, figurin' to run into yuh. Here it is."

Tombstone handed it to Speedy, who read it quickly, a blank expression on his thin face.

"Who's it from, Speedy?" Tombstone then asked.

"Jim Keaton."

"Huh? Jim Keaton. More orders?"

"Yuh see," confessed Speedy, "after we got to Silverbend, I sent Jim a telegram, tellin' him that the letter came, but was stolen. I asked him what was in the letter, and—"

"He told yuh just what I figured was in it, eh?"

"Not exactly," said Speedy. "The telegram says, 'Letter informed you that no more assignments available for you two. I never like to fire a man by wire.'"

"Him and his blasted letters!" snorted Tombstone. "Yuh know, I'm darned glad of one thing."

"What's that?" asked Speedy.

"That I never learned to read," replied Tombstone. "It must be awful."

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

Alamo Paige rose up behind the outlaw, his forearm coming up under Lampson's chin as the issue knife rose and fell in the pale moonlight

GHOST RIDER

By REEVE WALKER

When murderous outlaw foes leave him for dead on the plains, Pony Express Rider Alamo Paige returns as an avenging spook!

TWILIGHT was closing down over the green Wyoming hills. The setting sun, a red ball, hung suspended as if hesitating for a moment. Even the insects had stopped humming, and the night birds had not as yet started their nocturnal calls.

All of life seemed inanimate except for the lean chestnut racer, which carried Alamo Paige and the Pony Express mail. Horse and rider skimmed swiftly along the crest of a hill, dipped down a gentle slope which led to the crossing on Green River, and were hidden by the tall lush grass which grew on the margins of the peaceful stream.

Alamo Paige was a little man, but a mighty warrior. He weighed a hundred and twenty pounds with full equipment, but he had the wide shoulders and powerful arms of a middleweight. Paige was the ace of the Pony Express riders who carried the mail for Russell, Waddell, and Majors. The mail always went through.

Alamo Paige crouched low across the neck of his fast horse as a feeling of uneasiness

swept over him. It wasn't fear; Paige feared nothing that he could see. This was something different, as though unseen eyes were watching him, or perhaps a portent of impending disaster.

The lean racer stretched out and put on a renewed burst of speed as they swept through a low grass-grown swale. Then the horse tripped.

The racing animal went down as though its legs had been cut from under it by a mighty blade. Alamo Paige was hurled through the air and his head struck a small tree. For a moment he was stunned.

As the chestnut racer rolled over and came to its feet, a man rose up from the bushes and snatched off the *mochila,* the leather blanket bearing the mail. The horse jerked loose and ran way. The man ducked out of sight just as the sun sank behind the distant horizon in the west. Insects began to hum, and the night birds began to call in muted tones.

Alamo Paige still lay motionless where he had fallen. A rope whisked out of the brush and snared one of his very small boots. Then a horse appeared and dragged the Pony Express rider roughly into the clear as two men stepped out of the heavy bracken.

Alamo Paige was not wholly unconscious, but his brain was foggy from the terrific fall. He was not sure that he heard voices in the hazy distance, and he did not see the tall thin man who drew a heavy pistol as he stepped forward. The pistol swung down viciously to club Alamo Paige on the head, and the fading light vanished as the Pony Express rider lost consciousness.

QUICKLY the second man drew a Bowie knife from a scabbard on the left side of his belt. He lunged down at the unconscious jockey in the gathering gloom, and the tip of his blade was stained with crimson as he withdrew the razor-honed knife and plunged it in the grass-roots to clean it.

"Throw that loop off his boot, Bowie," the tall man growled at the knife-wielder. "Tod is coiling his twine, and I see he has that *mochilas.* Alamo Paige has carried his last batch of mail for the Pony Express!"

"Bowie" Crane threw off the noose, and Tod Lampson rode up with the flat mail blanket over his right arm. He grinned at the tall man whose bald yellowing head was like a skull in the semi-darkness.

"Better get on your horse, Jay Turner," the roper said quietly. "We all had a grudge to settle with Alamo Paige. Now his pards can plant him down along the river if they find him. Let's head for the hideout!"

* * * * *

Alamo Paige groaned and opened his eyes. For a moment he remained quiet as he tried to get his bearings. He grimaced wryly as memory concerning what had happened came back to him.

Now it was pitch dark. Only the early stars studded the sky here and there. Paige remembered the stumbling fall of his racing horse and his own flight through the thick bracken. He also remembered the distant voices, and the blow on the head which had knocked him unconscious.

A pain in his left shoulder sent his fingers exploring under his heavy buckskin shirt, and a little murmur escaped from his tight lips as he withdrew a heavy folded piece of white silk. Nat Duncan's wife had told him to get the cloth in order to make him a new shirt.

Paige knew that the folded cloth had saved his life as he felt the tattered cloth which was moist with his own blood. Only the point of the knife had pierced his skin to make a clean shallow wound. Though the blow on the head had glanced off, it had rendered him unconscious for awhile. Paige smiled grimly. He told himself he had been hurt worse many a time.

The jockey rider ignored his injuries and he went about the task of reading sign. He crawled up the trail where it passed between two cottonwood trees. He knew that a rope had been tied between the trees, just about ankle-high. The rope was gone, but Paige found the scars on one of the trees where the hemp had cut deeply into the green bark.

Paige leaned back against the tree until a wave of dizziness had passed. He could see a faint shimmer about fifty yards away where Green River lapped at the grassy banks. He crawled down to the river bank and doused his head beneath the clear cool water and the dizziness passed. Soon his strength began to return.

A horse snorted off to the right and Alamo Paige made out the outline of the chestnut thoroughbred. Talking softly, Paige made his way through the grass and found the bridle-reins caught in a dead tree near the water.

"Easy, hoss," Paige whispered, as his big hands stroked the quivering racer. Then those oversized hands of his passed down the slim front legs as he spoke, felt the rope-burns where the taut rope had tripped the running horse, and Alamo Paige growled deep in his throat.

Texas-born, Alamo Paige had been well taught in plainscraft. He could read sign an ordinary man might have missed. It was difficult for him not to forget his oath as a Pony Express rider now as he reconstructed what had happened. He had promised not to use intoxicating liquors, or to use profanity. Also, to guard the mail with his life.

The evidence was plain. His horse had been tripped, and he had been roped by the right boot. He remembered that much, and he knew that he had been clubbed with a gun. The slight wound in his left side completed his chain of evidence.

"Them three," he whispered hoarsely. "Tod Lampson did the rope work, Jay Turner belted me with his hand-gun, and Bowie Crane knifed me. They thought I was dead, the bushwhackin' thieves!"

PAIGE knew that only the heavy folded silk had saved him from death at the hands of Bowie Crane. The *mochilas* was missing from the light racing saddle. Now it was becoming clear to Alamo Paige.

One of the packets in the mail pouch contained ten thousand dollars in cash. Cal Fowler was buying the Powder Rim Ranch, and the owner had demanded cash. Paige was positive about the identity of his attackers, and then he remembered something else.

A hunting trip had taken him back into the river reaches of the Powder Rim Ranch, and he had stayed overnight in a line camp hidden among a cropping of granite. He hadn't thought much about that camp until he had seen Jay Turner and Bowie Crane riding along a high ridge just after a stage hold-up. They were wanted in California for robbery and murder, but there wasn't much law along the wild frontier. The line camp would be the natural hideout for the wanted outlaws.

Paige tightened his saddle and drank deeply of the river water. Strength had returned to his wiry frame, and the mail had to go through. His groping fingers touched his empty holster, but Paige grunted softly and retraced his steps to the trail where his horse had stumbled.

Paige went to his hands and knees and began to search through the bracken where he had regained consciousness. A little hiss escaped from his lips as his groping fingers touched his Dragoon cap-and-ball pistol and a while later he found his issue knife where it had fallen from the sheath.

Pony Express riders were picked because of their small size and enormous strength. They had pledged themselves to guard the mail with their lives. Neither summer droughts nor winter storms could stop the mail from going through, and if the mail was lost for any reason, the fighting jockeys had always recovered it.

Paige straightened up and studied the star-studded sky. He would not have to read sign to follow the trail of the three outlaws, and he muttered grimly below his breath.

"They left me for dead, the drygulching robbers. So I'll just stay dead for a little while!"

Silvery light from a sickle moon filtered over the green Wyoming hills as Alamo Paige rode out of the river bottom on the chestnut racer. His hair was plastered close to his head from the water of Green River.

Now he was in the foothills leading back to the low mountains toward the north. Sage brush and mesquite dotted the arid plains, and among the rubble of rocks there grew an abundance of an air plant resembling a cabbage.

Paige stopped his horse in a nest of rocks and dismounted. He had discovered where the Indians got the white pigment with which they daubed their bodies for their ceremonial dances. The under-side of the leaves of the cabbage-like plant were heavily coated with a white substance resembling heavy talcum.

The jockey rider plucked leaves and rubbed the undersides on his face and hands. He also rubbed some of the sticky powder on the chestnut racer, and he grinned in the pale moonlight as the chestnut began to look like a ghost-horse.

A vine was growing from the rocks where it had obtained moisture from some source. Alamo Paige picked a cow melon and covered it with the sticky white substance. A plan had formed in his fertile brain—a plan which might work—that is, for a dead man.

* * * * *

Pale light from the waning sickle moon threw a glow over the badlands which marked the southern boundary of the Powder Rim Ranch. Alamo Paige had seen a few range cattle near the water holes, and now he judged the time to be an hour after midnight.

He was riding through a stand of creosote brush when his attention was attracted to a blotch of dark color. His breathing quickened when he rode over and found the *mochilas* where the robbers had discarded it. Of the four pockets on the leather blanket, only one had been slashed open with a knife, the one which had contained the ten thousand dollars for Cal Fowler.

ALAMO PAIGE placed the mail blanket on his saddle and gripped it with his muscular legs. It felt natural to snug the *mochilas* against the light saddle but he had promised to deliver *all* the mail.

Again Paige was riding through the rubble of the badlands under the eerie fading light. At last he stopped and tied the thoroughbred to a springy branch in a stand of mesquite where the beans were plentiful. He did not want to risk a warning if his horse should whicker at the horses of the outlaws. It was perhaps a quarter of a mile to the line camp where Paige was sure the robbers were hiding.

There they would be safe from marauding Indians, because the old cabin was said to be haunted by the spirit of a crazy white man who had been murdered for a treasure of gold he had brought from the mining camps of California. Alamo Paige smiled grimly as he remembered that a crazy person was safe from the savage Indians, but civilized white men were different.

Alamo Paige was wearing a pair of moccasins he had been taking to a friend in Laramie. His feet made no sound among the sandy rubble and he moved with all the stealth of an Indian as he worked his way up through a brush-choked draw. A trail had been worn through the brush. Alamo Paige followed it to a pole corral where several horses were penned.

Now he worked slowly as a horse snorted. The animal had caught his scent, but when the horses placed that scent as the smell of a white man, they would quiet down. Paige moved up slowly, a foot at a time. Then he was at the bars, whispering softly under his breath to soothe the curious horses.

He found the sliding bars and worked them carefully along the rails. The three horses would find the opening and wander out after he had left.

Alamo Paige crouched in the brush as he studied the line cabin silhouetted against the eastern sky. Not a sound came from the little house, and Paige worked his way up closer and hid behind a nest of circling rocks near a water hole.

He picked up a chunk of granite and weighed it in his right hand. He drew back his right arm, threw the chunk into the corral, and the three horses snorted and raced around the pen. Then they were through the opening with a clatter of hoofs and Paige heard a muffled shout from the line cabin.

"Git out there and see what's wrong with them cayuses, Tod!"

Alamo Paige crept closer with his issue knife in his right hand. The back door opened, and Tom Lampson walked into the yard swinging his catch-rope.

Alamo Paige had propped up the cow melon on a rock near the water hole, and he threw a small pebble in the direction of the melon which was daubed with the sticky white powder.

Tod Lampson turned his head to trace the fall of the pebble. Then he grunted and his right arm went back for a throw. His noose hissed through the air, but Alamo Paige was already moving.

Now Paige was behind the roper. He leaped like a tree cat, with his left forearm coming up under Lampson's chin. Then the issue knife rose and fell in the pale moonlight, and Tod Lampson grunted as he sagged to the hard-packed ground.

Alamo Paige was gone into the brush like a startled deer. He could hear the shuffle of boots in the moonlight, and again he moved the white cow melon so that it faced the back door. A low moan came from the lips of the Pony Express rider as he crouched in the dense brush.

"I want my gold!" Paige quavered in a high-pitched voice.

The shuffling boots became quiet inside the cabin. Silence for a moment, and then a hoarse voice whispered through the gloom.

"Must be the ghost of that old prospector. Let's pull out of these badlands, Turner!"

"I don't believe in ghosts," Paige heard Jay Turner mutter. Once more the Pony Express rider began to moan softly.

"It's a ghost, sure enough," he heard Bowie Crane exclaim. "Oh! Look yonder, Jay!"

Alamo Paige knew that Crane had seen the ghostly cow melon. Then the still air was shattered by a pistol shot, and the melon wobbled on the high rock. A second shot sent the melon tumbling to the ground, and after the echoes of the shots had died away, there was a deep silence.

"Well, yore ghost is gone," he heard Jay Turner boast, and once more Alamo Paige began to moan.

"Yuh can't nohow kill a ghost," he heard Bowie Crane say hoarsely. "I hear it kickin' up a fuss out yonder!"

NOW Alamo Paige decided upon a daring move. He stretched up out of the brush took a few steps in the ghostly moonlight and then made a sudden dive into the brush and made himself thin. But instead of staying where he was, he crawled through the brush like a snake and came around on the

other side of the cabin.

A shot blasted out at the place where he had showed himself. Then he heard Bowie Crane whisper in a shaky voice.

"Did you see what I saw, Jay?"

"Yuh mean yuh saw it too?"

"It looked like that runty Pony Express jockey," Crane whispered hoarsely. "Only it was all white!"

"Shucks!" Jay Turner sneered, but there was no conviction in his voice. "Alamo Paige was shore dead all over when we left him down by Green River. They never come back!"

"Lookee out yonder," Alamo heard Crane say. "Tod Lampson ain't a-movin'."

"Get out there and give him a hand," Jay Turner ordered. "Like as not he tripped over his own feet, and hit his head again a chunk."

"Who, me?" Crane blurted. "Uh-uh!" His voice grew sullen. "Mebbe them ghosts never come back, but I don't want no truck with either one of them."

Alamo Paige hugged the ground and listened. He heard the click of metal which told him that Jay Turner had thumbed back the hammer of his gun. Then Turner spoke in a curious high-pitched voice.

"Get on out there, Bowie. Drag Tod in here and after we slop him down with a bucket of water, mebbe he can tell us something. I'll cover yuh with my gun. But I'll blow yore brains out if yuh don't do what I say!"

Alamo Paige drew his issue knife and palmed the keen blade in his right hand. He waited behind the circle of rocks which were also screened by dense brush. At last he heard the shuffle of a heavy boot, and the sullen complaining voice of Bowie Crane.

"You're the boss, Turner," Crane muttered. "I know yuh're plumb good with that pistol, but it would be different if yuh only had a knife."

"It is different," Turner growled. "You make a pass at me with that knife and I'll blow yuh out from under yore hat!"

"I'm goin'," Crane muttered, and Paige saw a bulky form appear in the cabin door. He also saw the sheen of the long-bladed Bowie in Crane's beefy fist, and the Pony Express rider twitched with the memory of his wound from that terrible blade.

Bowie Crane came out into the yard in a crouch. He circled slightly to the left which took him out of the line of fire from Jay Turner's gun. He avoided being sky-lined against the dark horizon as he cautiously approached the body of Tod Lampson.

Alamo Paige moaned softly as he watched through slitted eyes. Bowie Crane had knifed him while he was unconscious—had left him for dead beside the river.

Crane stopped and turned his big head. His battered hat was tugged low over his piggish eyes. The heavy knife was held for a throw as he crouched in a listening attitude.

Paige groaned again, and stretched up until his head appeared above the green brush. He saw Bowie Crane stiffen, and he could hear the big outlaw's startled grunt.

"That jocky Ghost!" Crane muttered hoarsely, and his right arm went back for a deadly toss.

Alamo Paige shifted swiftly to the side, and his right arm swept out to hurl the issue knife like a silvered shaft. The blade struck Crane in the left breast just as the Bowie knife left his hand, and Alamo Paige shuddered when the knife quivered from the bole of a small sapling.

Bowie Crane was swaying like a stricken tree which has been hit by lightning. He lost his balance, tripped forward to measure his length, and his outstretched hands almost touched Tod Lampson.

Alamo Paige hunkered down on the heels of his moccasins to wait. Silence for a moment, after which Bowie Crane's boots began to rattle a tattoo on the hard ground. Then the hoarse whispering voice of Jay Turner came from the line cabin.

"Don't try no tricks with that knife, Crane. Drag Lampson back in here, and quit that shakin' like a skeleton."

ALAMO PAIGE smiled without mirth as he muffled his mouth against the sleeve of his hunting shirt. A low wavering moan drifted through the still night air, growing louder as Paige withdrew his arm from his mouth, and dying away to a whisper of sound as he again muffled his voice.

Paige did not see Jay Turner appear at the door, but he heard the outlaw's startled gasp which told him that Turner had discovered Bowie Crane on the ground near Tod Lampson. Then Turner's voice whispered through the hazy gloom.

"Bowie! You all right?"

Alamo Paige began to groan softly with his head turned away. He wondered if Turner would venture into the yard, and the Pony Express rider loosened the cap-and-ball pistol in its skin scabbard. Once he thought he saw a shadow on the floor near the door, but he could not risk a shot to make sure. Jay Turner was a dead shot with a Colt, and if his two partners were dead, there would be that much more loot for himself.

Alamo Paige again smiled coldly. A man

on foot was at a disadvantage on the plains where he would be easy prey for the nomadic Indian tribes. The three horses had stampeded, and it would require another horse to catch them.

"You, Bowie," Jay Turner called again, but now his voice had a nervous rasp in it. "Answer me, or I'll make a ghost out of you!"

Alamo Paige knew that the outlaw's nerves were on edge. He also knew that Turner would have to shift far to the right to see the sprawling form of Bowie Crane, and Paige watched the bottom of the open doorway on that side.

He could hear a dragging sound inside the cabin, and then all was still. Suddenly a pistol roared savagely and burst into flame almost at floor level, and Alamo Paige saw the body of Bowie Crane twitch convulsively under the impact of the heavy slug.

"Him and Tod Lampson must have tried to kill each other," Paige heard Turner mutter. "Me, I don't take no stock in ghosts!" Alamo Paige turned his head and groaned softly. Then he muffled his voice and spoke haltingly.

"I want the mail. Got to deliver the mail!"

He could almost feel the silence which pressed down after his startling announcement. Would he have to wait for daylight and then keep Jay Turner forted up inside the line cabin until the outlaw's grub ran out?

Alamo Paige shrugged and dismissed that thought. He had eaten a hearty supper before leaving Green River Crossing with the mail, and the outlaw would at least have some supplies in the cabin. A hail from the cabin caused Paige to jerk up his battered head.

"Hey, Ghost. Which one are you?"

Paige decided that if he had his druthers, he might as well have the odds on his side. But it was a funny question for a man who did not believe in ghosts. Now it sounded as though Turner was not sure. Alamo Paige muffled his mouth against the sleeve of his buckskin shirt.

"I want my gold," he whispered, in the high quavering voice of an old man, and then he took a deep breath. "I want the Pony Express mail," he added in low deep tones. "You can't get away from us!"

"I ain't got the mail," Jay Turner answered after a pause. "We threw the pouch away!"

"I found the *mochilas*," Alamo Paige answered sternly. "One of the packets had been opened with a knife!"

Alamo Paige then did a strange thing. He crouched low behind his nest of rocks, fumbled on the ground until his fingers touched the punctured cow-melon, and he picked it up gingerly. The sticky white substance gleamed through the gloom like a skull, and Paige found a short branch and thrust the end through a bullet hole in the ghostly melon.

"I want my gold," he wavered in the voice of the old prospector.

As he spoke, Paige pushed the melon up over the rim of the rocks. A shattering roar blasted from the open cabin door, and the melon jerked back as the heavy slug struck it center.

Alamo lowered the melon and moved to the east. Then he again pushed the melon up and over the rimrock. Again that shattering roar blasted the night apart, and the melon fell to the ground in several pieces.

"I want my gold," Alamo Paige whispered, as he moved back to his former position.

"Yuh're dead, old man," Turned shouted, and his voice sounded a bit more confident. "I know yuh're dead, on account of I shot yuh through the head my ownself and Bowie Crane drove his knife through yore heart like he done for that runty Express rider."

UPON hearing this horrible boast, Alamo Paige felt the blood turn to ice in his veins. The tall outlaw had admitted one murder and Turner was also sure that Alamo Paige was dead. Paige felt no remorse for the two sprawling forms in the yard between his hiding place and the line cabin. They were killers, and the Pony Express rider was an advocate of the survival of the fittest.

Alamo Paige remained silent as he thought hard. If Jay Turner had admitted murder, perhaps he would talk some more with his mouth wide open. At least, it was worth a try.

"What did you do with my gold?" Paige quavered.

He heard Jay Turner chuckle in the gloom of the cabin. "We spent most of that California gold down Laramie way," Turner boasted. "I still got a poke of it hid out under my bunk. Come on in and get it, old man!"

Alamo Paige listened intently, but now his nostrils were flaring with the desire for battle. He had seen the old prospector occasionally in Laramie when old Dad Burns had come to town for provisions. A harmless old man, seventy years old, an ancient pioneer who rode a sway-backed old mare and who had told many a stirring story about the wild gold-camp of San Francisco.

Alamo Paige swallowed hard as memory

gripped him. He had helped carry the plain pine box in which old Dad Burns had been laid away in what the old miner had called his "other" clothes. A suit of black broadcloth grown green with age. He had been killed by a bullet between his kindly old eyes and a deep knife wound through his stout old heart.

The Pony Express rider gulped and shrugged his square shoulders. Old Dad was gone, and he wouldn't be needing anything, but the mail was something different. The mail must go through.

Alamo Paige gripped the handles of his gun as he stared across the gloom-shrouded yard. Now a leaden finger was plucking at the eastern sky to announce that day-break would not be long delayed. Perhaps he could find out something about the missing ten thousand which had been consigned to Cal Fowler, and which had been intrusted to the Pony Express for safe delivery. Paige took a deep breath and spoke clearly.

"Alamo Paige speaking, Turner. I want that ten thousand in currency!"

"What?" he heard the startled outlaw bark. "You sound like that runty jockey in the flesh!"

"I am in the flesh," Alamo Paige answered truthfully. "You don't believe in ghosts!"

"You ain't him," Turner contradicted. "I'd take my swear on that. Not after Bowie did his work!"

"You can't kill a Pony Express rider," Paige said dolefully, and again his voice was muffled. "I want that ten thousand dollars for Cal Fowler. He has to pay it over at noon or lose the Powder Rim Ranch!"

"To the devil with Cal Fowler!" the outlaw blazed back viciously. "That's for why we stuck up the mail. We had a safe hideout, and you was the only one who saw us back here in these hills. I should have killed yuh the day after Dad Burns was planted."

Alamo Paige decided on a last desperate chance. He slipped away through the brush, feeling confident that Turner would not leave the line cabin. He headed for the mesquite thicket where he had tied the chestnut racer.

The horse was eating beans, and seemed thoroughly rested. The sticky white powder still coated its glossy chestnut coat, and Alamo Paige threw off the slip-knot and vaulted to the saddle. A moment later he was riding through the dying night in the last faint rays of the sickle moon.

Paige heard a voice as he drew near to the line cabin. Jay Turner was talking, and Paige threw back his head and moaned. He kept out of pistol range as he circled the cabin and rode along the rim-rock. He made no effort to avoid being sky-lined as he held the white-coated horse to a slow walk.

A shot blasted out from the cabin, but Alamo Paige only shrugged. He took his little bugle from the saddle where it was held by a bit of whang-leather. The bell was crushed and bent, but Alamo Paige raised the bugle to his lips and blew a blast.

Another shot whistled harmlessly through the brush below him. Paige reined into a thicket, slipped from the saddle, and tied the horse to a springy branch.

THEN he crouched low and made his stealthy way back to his hiding place behind the circling nest of rocks which faced the line-cabin door.

"Yuh can't nohow fight a ghost!" Jay Turner screamed.

"I want that ten thousand," Alamo Paige said softly, as though he had been there all the time.

"Come and get it!" Turner screamed. "A ghost couldn't have done for Tod Lampson and Bowie Crane, and yuh don't pack the grit to face me for a shoot out!"

"Yuh can't shoot a ghost," Paige answered in a hollow voice. "It wouldn't be a fair shake."

"Who are you? Turner whispered hoarsely.

"Mebbe I'm a ghost rider, but I feel like Alamo Paige." The answer came softly across the clearing. "It's coming on daylight, Turner. The boys will be lookin' for me when I don't show up, and I left a plain trail to follow."

There was silence for a moment. This seemed to indicate that Jay Turner was thinking. When he spoke it was like a man who has made a decision.

"I don't take no stock in ghosts, and when I kill a man, he's dead all over. I'm coming out, and I've got that ten thousand in my pocket!"

Alamo Paige began to breathe deeply. He stretched to his feet, keeping behind a clump of brush. He saw a vague slender shape blot out the open doorway. Slowly Jay Turner walked into the yard.

"Shoot, ghost!" Turner taunted brazenly. "I'm clearing out of Wyoming, but I might as well take what them two pards of mine have in their clothes!"

Alamo Paige drew his pistol and watched the advancing outlaw. Jay Turner was not afraid, he'd give the outlaw that much. Turner stared curiously at Bowie Crane, leaned over, and plucked the issue knife from the dead man's breast.

"So it wasn't a ghost," Paige heard Turner mutter, and now the light was getting stronger. "I ain't afraid of anything I can see."

"But you're jumpy," Paige taunted in a whisper. "Yuh'd shoot at anything that moves, and yore gun must be running dry!"

Jay Turner straightened up and turned his head. He was without a hat, and his bald head gleamed like a yellow skull in the pre-dawn light. His eyes were drawn and puckered as he tried to place the spot from which the voice came. After a time he shrugged his thin stooped shoulders.

"Ghost or not, step out and bring me powder smoke," Turner said quietly, and he holstered his grimy gun. "I ain't never been beat at the draw up to now!"

Alamo Paige stared his unbelief. Then he realized that the killer was taking his only chance. Jay Turner had nothing to lose but his life which was already forfeited. If the outlaw won this gamble with death, he could ride out of Wyoming a free man, with money in his pocket.

Money that had been intrusted to the Pony Express. Mail which Alamo Paige had pledged himself to deliver at the risk of his own life.

Alamo Paige pouched his pistol and straightened his shoulders. Promptly he stepped from the brush into the clearing. He heard a startled gasp from the stiff lips of the tall slender killer.

"Alamo Paige, and you *are* a ghost!"

Paige had forgotten about the white powder on his battered face. Now he was facing the man who had killed old Dad Burns, and had robbed the Pony Express.

"I'm not a ghost, Turner," Paige contradicted, but his voice sounded tired. "I'm Alamo Paige in the flesh!"

"Yuh're a ghost," Turner repeated, and his tongue made a peculiar rasping sound as he licked his dry lips. Then the outlaw straightened his sagging shoulders. "Me, I don't believe in ghosts." He spoke like a man who tries to assure himself.

"I want that ten thousand," Alamo Paige said slowly. "The mail must go through!"

"If it does, it will be carried by a ghost rider," Turner vowed savagely. "I'm comin' at yuh, smokin'!"

PROMPTLY Turner went into swift action as his lips hissed the deathly warning. His right hand stabbed for the gun in his holster, but Alamo Paige also struck with the suddenness of a deadly rattler. His hand flicked down and up with scarcely a pause, and the Dragoon pistol roared like a cannon as he touched off his powder.

Jay Turner jerked back under the impact of the ball, and his finger pressed trigger to send a futile shot into the ground between himself and the ghostly rider. Turner swayed forward, buckled at the knees, and sagged to the ground like a limp buckskin shirt. His scarred boots rattled briefly and came to rest.

Alamo Paige staggered from weariness as he paced forward, stiff-legged, like a dog on the fight. He stirred the body of Turner with a moccasined foot, reached down and felt inside the hunting shirt, and found a crumpled envelope. The envelope had been opened, but the stiff paper currency was intact. Paige stuffed the letter in his pocket, and slowly shook his head.

"Mebbe old Dad Burns will take his rest now," Paige murmured, and then he climbed the sloping trail to the brush pocket where he had left his horse. He grinned as he mounted the saddle on the white-coated horse.

"The mail must go through," Alamo Paige said with a little smile tugging at the corners of his hard mouth. "Even if it has to be carried by the Ghost Rider!"

Further exciting exploits of the Pony Express Rider in IN THE LINE OF DUTY, Another Smashing Alamo Paige Action Story by REEVE WALKER coming in the next issue!

The walls rocked with the sound of their guns, and Sterling smelled the sharp, pungent smell of gunpowder

THE QUILLS OF TEBO STERLING

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

It took a lowly porcupine to prove to young Tebo, of the fast gun and hot temper, that neighbors are good people!

WHEN he saw the man come into the saloon that Saturday afternoon in Crosstrees, Tebo Sterling was certain that trouble had caught up with him again. The hot resentment which always smouldered in him leapt into flame. He had never been able to understand why he had been singled out so frequently as a focal point for trouble, but he had accepted the fact, and his acceptance made him short-tempered and touchy.

It was not that the people of Crosstrees had been antagonistic, but that they had been reserved about him, waiting to see what kind of man this younger brother of Marshal Pete Sterling was. They knew his reputation, and it was not a good one. This range had not accepted him, and he knew it.

So his muscles tensed and his jaws clamped tightly, this Saturday afternoon when the man came in, wiping trail dust from his red, sweaty face with a blue bandanna hand-

kerchief as he headed for the bar. Sterling knew the man by sight and by reputation.

The stranger stood near Sterling while he ordered a beer. Then, when his eyes became adjusted to the shade, he looked at the faces up and down the bar and his gaze settled finally on young Sterling. He spoke in an undertone, inaudible to anybody except Sterling.

"Howdy, there, Fifty Thousand. I was lookin' for yuh."

Tebo looked at him coldly. The man was squat and heavy, and his wind-burned face was not clean to look at, nor were his eyes good as they blinked back at him.

"My name is Sterling," Tebo answered coolly. "I don't like the one yuh just called me."

The man drained his beer at a gulp while he thought that over. Then he wiped the foam off his stringy mustache.

"Yuh don't have to git yore back up like a danged porcupine," he growled. "I knowed yuh when that was yore number."

"That'll be enough of that," Sterling snapped. "We weren't friends in prison, and we're not friends now."

"Maybe not," the man shrugged, indifferent to the rebuff. "But I hear yuh got a nice setup here, with yore brother the marshal, and all. Remember Lige Boyce? He's around, and him and me has got a little proposition to make yuh."

"Mister," Sterling said in a low tight voice, "move away from me right now. I don't want any part of you or Boyce, or any of yore propositions."

The man drained a second glass of beer and wiped his mouth again. He did not seem at all put out at the refusal. He looked at Sterling through the backbar mirror.

"That's mighty bad, since I done talked too much to yuh," he said. "I didn't know yuh were a white-livered skunk."

TEBO STERLING'S eyes were glued to the backbar mirror, and he saw the man's hand sliding down toward his weapon. It was with a sense of fatalism, coupled with a cynical anger, that he watched the man taunting him into a shooting.

Sterling's feet steadied themselves while his eyes never moved. He saw the sneak draw, could even now hear what the man intended to say about shooting in self defense. The stranger's gun came up, hidden from the crowd between his body and the bar, the muzzle rising toward Sterling's middle.

It was a dirty, snide attempt at cold blooded murder. And Sterling's restraint snapped. Just in time, he jerked his own gun free of its scabbard and blew a hole through the man's neck. The man didn't even clutch at the bar as he fell and died in the sawdust, lying on his own unfired gun.

It was the unfired gun that caused the talk later.

While two men rushed out of the saloon, a hush fell over the others. Sterling looked at them defiantly, then picked up his beer glass and finished emptying it. Then he went out to find his brother, not looking back once at the dead man on the floor of the barroom.

He found Pete coming hurriedly toward the saloon, followed by the pair who had reported the killing. He met Pete and drew him off to the edge of the wooden sidewalk.

Pete was nearing forty, big boned and lean, and with a aura of nervous hurry about him, which often expressed itself in impatience.

"What's the trouble?" he demanded.

Tebo told him what had happened, not defensively, but as a simple statement of fact.

"He had his gun out for a sneak shot, but I saw it and beat him to it. It was either him or me," he finished.

Pete scratched his chin.

"But I don't understand why he'd try to kill yuh just because yuh wouldn't have anythin' to do with him."

"I know. He's a hombre they called Coyote Collins back in prison. He bragged that he'd never got a dollar in his life except at the point of a gun, and never intended to. From what he said, I figger he and Lige Boyce, who's worse, had somethin' planned to pull around here and wanted me in on it on account of you bein' marshal. Probably figgered you and me was workin' some deviltry of some kind. Then when I wouldn't come in on it, he wanted to shut my mouth before I got a chance to tip yuh off about it."

Pete thought a minute, then looked at his younger brother searchingly.

"That could be, of course," he admitted. "Sure yuh hadn't had trouble back in prison?"

Tebo felt his gorge rising.

"I told yuh, didn't I, that I'd never had any dealin's with him before? Are yuh doubtin' my word?"

Pete started toward the saloon.

"All right. Come on, and don't be so touchy. That's what's wrong with yuh. Too all-fired touchy."

They went back to the saloon, and now

the ranchers were gathered in a group which suddenly became silent when the brothers walked in. Pete sent a man for the doctor, then addressed the crowd in general.

"What happened?"

There was no response. Pete scratched his chin, then changed his question.

"Perkins, what happened?"

A silver-haired rancher sitting at one of the tables looked uncomfortable.

"Well—to tell you the truth, Pete, I didn't see anythin' till I heard the shot," he answered reluctantly. "Then I seen that hombre fall. That's all I know."

"Did anybody see this stranger draw a gun?"

Nobody had.

"Anybody hear any argument?"

Again nobody knew anything, and Tebo felt anger rising in him toward his brother.

"Pete," he said sharply. "I told yuh exactly what happened. The man was sneakin' his gun out, hid between him and the bar. These gents wouldn't have noticed it because he didn't want them to. If yuh think I'm lyin', then lock me up."

Perkins spoke up. "Pete, I don't think any of us would be in a position to dispute whatever yore brother says happened."

Tebo saw what the man meant. The ranchers did not know that the stranger had drawn his gun first, but on account of Pete, whom they respected, they were not accusing his brother of a deliberate killing. They were throwing it directly into Pete's lap, while they kept their own ideas to themselves. And Tebo had no illusions about what those ideas were.

PETE made his decision quickly, but he gave Tebo a long, speculative look before he announced it.

"Yore story ain't denied by anybody," he said carefully. "So I'll take yore word for it. But I'd be a little slower to take offense, if I was you. A man that shoots as fast a gun as you do has to be extra careful."

Then he turned and walked out.

Tebo's face burned with anger as he watched his brother go. He resented the humiliation of being dressed down by Pete in the presence of these ranchers. . . .

Although his own homestead was separated only by the section line from that belonging to Pete, Tebo Sterling did not see his brother for ten days. He purposely avoided him because he was still angry.

He felt that Pete's asking the others in the saloon about the shooting constituted proof that Pete doubted him, and this hurt him even more than the fact that now, since the shooting, he saw a new coolness toward him from everybody. Even the owner of the general store, while being polite, was pointedly impersonal. Neighboring ranchers spoke stiffly when he passed them.

He was out back of his new pond putting up some cross fencing when he next saw him. Pete rode up, his horse sweating, and he did not dismount.

"Now yuh got a chance to do some good with that fast gun of yores," he said. "Bob Perkins' whole herd of Hereford yearlin's was stolen last night. We're formin' the posse at Rock Springs. Get yore gun and get there as quick as yuh can. Hurry up!"

Pete's voice was sharp with authority and with his natural tension. It struck Tebo as a command, and being still angry, he resented it.

"I'm busy," he answered. He picked up his post hole diggers and started another hole.

"But I'm tellin' yuh" Pete answered, after a moment of surprise. "They stole Perkins' herd. We got to get 'em."

Bitterly, Tebo remembered the white-haired rancher refusing to voice anything he knew about the shooting less than two weeks before. He remembered Perkins' formal nod when they had passed each other on the road less than a week ago. Perkins was just like the rest of them, looking out for himself alone.

"Yuh're the law, ain't yuh?" he asked "Well, it's yore job to catch the rustlers."

Pete sat his horse straight, his fist on his thigh, and silently looked long at the youth digging the hole. Finally he spoke.

"Yuh know that Perkins is a neighbor of yores, don't yuh?"

"What if he is?" Tebo returned angrily. "I don't owe him anythin'. I got my work to do, same as he has."

After another uncomfortable silence, Pete spoke again.

"Yuh know who stole that stuff, don't yuh? If yuh had played that Collins hombre along and found out what they had up their sleeves, then told me, this wouldn't have happened. The signs are that this is the work of yore friend Boyce and his gang."

He waited for the impact of this to hit Tebo. It hit with a blow that made his rage boil over.

"If yuh're tryin' to connect me with Boyce, yuh've got a job on yore hands," he said angrily. "I told yuh before that I never had nothin' to do with them men. Now go on about yore marshalin' and let me alone,

will yuh?"

Pete dropped off his horse easily and stood facing Tebo.

"Listen here, you," he snapped. "I've done everythin' for yuh I can. But I can't, and don't even want to, cover yuh if yuh're mixed up with any of those crooks. Yuh might have been telling the truth the other night, but I'm an officer of the law, and I wouldn't be doin' my duty to my neighbors if I passed up a killin' without gettin' all the facts. Particularly, if it was a brother of mine that's got a reputation of bein' a sour, itchy-fingered gun hand."

Tebo hit him on the jaw with a sudden surge of rage that knocked Pete backward into the dust. As he fell, Pete's gun slid out of holster and fell a few feet away. Pete rolled over instantly, got up and stepped toward his gun. Then he stopped. He looked strangely at Tebo who stood unarmed, his fists still doubled up.

Then Pete turned his back on his brother, picked up his gun and holstered it. He said nothing as he mounted and rode away.

TEBO leaned on his post hole diggers and watched the retreating form, and the feelings in him were so mixed that he did not himself know why he felt like he did. He slammed the diggers down into the half finished hole and stalked up to his cabin, disgusted with the whole world.

He could not remember of ever having felt any other way since his early youth.

His step-father, and Pete's, had been an old squatter who had spent his life blaming more effective men for his own lack of success, and he had taken out his disappointment on the boys. Raised hungry, both of them had early learned to look out for themselves.

They had asked nothing of anybody, and Tebo had no intention of taking any more rough treament from the world.

His quick temper had got him two years in prison when he had shot too quickly in an argument. The other man hadn't even got his gun free of its holster. He came back more bitter than ever, and with Pete's help, had homesteaded near him. And now, in this last affair, even Pete seemed to be turning against him.

Just as he picked up his diggers, his yellow hound came tearing out of the postoak woods down past the barn and ran yelping up to him, with three porcupine quills dangling from his nose. He caught the dog to yank the quills out, but the dog cried and tried to pull away.

"What's the matter?" he snapped. "I'm just tryin' to help yuh. Come here, yuh hammer-headed fool."

He caught the hound and held the animal's neck between his legs while he extracted the quills. The dog howled and tried to snap at him, and when the quills were out, he ran and crawled whimpering under the cabin.

"Now ain't you smart!" he said to the crying animal. "Yuh go interferin' in a porcupine's business an' he gives yuh just what yuh deserve. An' then yuh try to bite back at somebody that's tryin' to help yuh outa yore own foolishness."

He hitched up his team and drove down to the creek to cut more posts. His dog followed him, and while he was cutting, the dog again found the porcupine and set up a campaign of barking. Tebo found the animals and watched them a few moments, contemptuous of the actions of both.

He spoke to the dog.

"Yuh had warnin'," he said. "And if yuh ain't got sense enough to let that critter alone, yuh can pick the quills outa yore own nose after this. That porky ain't no good for anythin' anyway, either to himself or anybody else."

He went on with his post cutting, and took a load of them back to the fencing job around his pond. Something was worrying him, but he did not know what it was.

He had started digging post holes again when a rider came fogging the dust up the road and pulled into his place. Tebo had never seen him before.

"Mind if I water my animal here?" he asked. "I been kinda pushin' him."

"Help yoreself," Sterling answered, looking at the sweated animal. "Looks like yuh been in a race."

"I have," the man answered. "I'm headed for town to try to round up some more possemen before that Boyce skunk kills every decent rancher in the valley. He's already killed three men and wounded the marshal, and if we don't get him, he's gonna keep on killin'."

"The marshal?" Tebo repeated. "What's the matter they can't get this Boyce hombre?"

"Boyce and his partner is holed up in a rock cave up in the hills, and they can't get him out without losin' a lot of good men. The marshal tried it after somebody in the posse hinted he was coverin' his worthless brother, that knowed them rustlers back in the pen somewhere."

Tebo Sterling felt the blood surge to his

face, and he was on the point of slugging the man when it dawned on him that this man could not have known who he was, and that the man could only have been repeating what he had heard from others.

"Ain't there anybody up there can outshoot this Boyce?"

The man snorted. "Decent ranchers ain't generally fancy gun hands. They say there ain't but one man in the country that could outshoot Boyce, and that's the marshal's brother, and he may even be mixed up with Boyce. Anyway, they say he's so unneighborly he'd see his neighbors stole blind before he'd raise a hand to help. It's a dirty shame."

"It sure is," Tebo snapped. "Where's this Boyce holed up?"

"Six miles east on this road, and about a half a mile north, halfway up a hill with three big pines on the peak. You wantin' to join in? They can use all the neighbors that will help."

"Yeah," Tebo said. "I might ride out and try to give 'em a hand."

"Good," the man answered, pulling his horse out of the edge of the pond. "Tell 'em I'm gone after more men."

RIDING toward the hill of the three pines, Tebo Sterling rode with an easier mind than he had ever known in his life. It was true that he was worried about how badly Pete was wounded, but this was not great as compared with the heavier thing which had rolled off his shoulders when he had suddenly seen the answer to his problem.

He knew now why there had been so little satisfaction in his life, why he had gotten into so much trouble, and why even the men who should have called him neighbor had distrusted him.

He had seen himself out in the woods when he had looked at the porcupine, when he had seen this animal whose defenses had made him so touchy that he was of no use to himself or the world, and whose neighbors, if they had any intelligence at all, left him strictly alone.

Tebo Sterling had demanded that the world leave him strictly alone, and it had, all except those who had been reckless enough to fool with him, and who had had to pay for it. Even Pete was paying for being his brother, paying with his reputation.

It was clear now, and Tebo rode up into the hills eagerly.

The first man he saw as he dismounted halfway up the hill, where the sound of occasional shots could clearly be heard, was old silver-haired Perkins. Perkins looked at him suspiciously from where he lay on his belly, a rifle propped over a protective sandstone boulder. The old man spat in the dust. Tebo saw it and winced.

Tebo dropped down beside the old rancher just as a bullet whined and chipped the rock.

"Where's Pete?" he asked. "And how is he?"

Perkins kept his eyes on a cave entrance high above him.

"He's not hurt bad, but bleedin' too much to move till a doctor patches him," he replied. "What do yuh want here?"

"I thought maybe I could help," Tebo answered. "I'm not too bad with a gun."

"Yeah, I know." Perkins spoke cryptically. "I reckon we'll make out, though. We wouldn't want to put yuh to any trouble."

"Listen here, Mr. Perkins," Tebo said. "I've been a fool for a mighty long time, havin' my back up, an' thinkin' I wasn't beholden to nobody. Just today it came to me how wrong I was. It ain't easy to say, but I'd be mighty proud if my neighbors gave me a chance to try to make it up to 'em."

Old Perkins stared open-mouthed at him until a bullet made him duck his head.

"No," he said finally, "I reckon a thing like that wouldn't be easy to say. Pete's over behind that big round boulder. I reckon he'd be mighty glad to know yuh're here. Take care, them buzzards is mighty straight with a rifle."

Tebo skittered between rocks until he found Pete lying back of a big outcrop, stripped to the waist and with his shirt torn into bandages for his bloody chest.

"Look, Pete," he said, dropping to his knees. "Just take it easy. I'll go get Boyce for yuh. Yuh were right, I been on the wrong track. Now, how's the best way to get up there to them coyotes? I don't know this hill."

Pete gazed at him a moment, his first suspicious look turning gradually to belief, and then his face breaking into a broad grin. He saw the truth in Tebo's face, and what he saw made him glad.

"Bueno, feller," he said. "We can use yuh. But here's the situation. That pair picked them a spot, and dynamite can't dislodge 'em. There's no way up to the mouth of the cave without exposin' us to their rifles. We just got to have so many men they can't kill us all, then rush 'em. With them protected and us exposed, it ain't

gonna be pretty."

"That's kinda hard on the ranchers, ain't it?" Tebo asked speculatively.

"It is," Pete admitted. "But it's always that way; some good men have to die so that the rest can live in peace. It's tough, but that's the way it is."

"Yeah," Tebo answered absently.

He was looking up the steep hillside, a tilted jumble of sandstone boulders and brush, scrub oak and cedars, running upward toward a towering rock wall of gigantic boulders. These great boulders stood on edge like a massive row of curbstones, and they seemed purposely arranged there to hold back the mountain's summit from tumbling into the valley below.

PETE looked up, too, then turned a thoughtful glance to his brother.

"Yuh can probably find something to do to help," he said. "After all, yuh ain't been what yuh might call neighbors with the rest of 'em, so they wouldn't be expectin' yuh to take too much risk on their account."

"Sure," Tebo answered absently. "But if I was considerin' bein' a neighbor—" he broke off suddenly. "Say, is there a trail that leads around that wall?"

"Yeah, but yuh'd have to let yoreself down to the ledge Boyce's cave is on with a rope, and yuh'd be a sittin' duck while yuh was slidin' down the rope. I figgered on that before, but it's sure death."

"Got a rope on yore saddle?" Tebo asked, getting to his feet.

"Every man here brought his lariat—just in case we caught 'em."

"I'll be back shortly," Tebo said .

He found a lariat on the first horse he located, then spent a good half hour finding the upward trail and working his way around to the wall containing the cave. He was sweating and out of breath when he stopped at the point he had aimed for, and he sat down and rested.

He was on the cap of one of the upturned sandstone slabs which formed one side of the cave entrance. A sheer drop of twenty feet below him would terminate on the ledge in front of the cave mouth, where Boyce and his partner lay behind a smaller rock safely picking off every rancher who made the mistake of exposing himself to their accurate fire.

Not far overhead, half a dozen buzzards sailed ominously on the updrafts of air, rising on still wings, wheeling and settling, rising again—waiting patiently, hungrily.

Tebo breathed deeply of the good air, and his eyes swept the miles of green and yellow checkered valley below him, followed the winding ribbon of green woods along the streams of clear cool water which ran down from the hills. He saw the herds dotting the meadows, Black Angus, Herefords and polled Shorthorns. There were clumps of buildings and outbuildings, painted white, and here and there a windmill pointed its steel fingers up toward the fleecy clouds.

It was a good country, a land a man could dig his feet into, a land that a man could call home and could love. But it was a land a man also had to swear allegiance to, a land stronger than one man, where neighbors had to join their strength to subdue it, and earn the right to call it home. And frequently they had to buy it with their blood.

And now, for the first time, Tebo Sterling saw these things, and he did not think the price too great.

He picked up the lariat, looped one end of it to the base of a twisted pine, and dropped the other end of it over the sandstone wall, so that its lower end hung dangling in front of the mouth of Boyce's cave—knowing full well that it would be seen. Gripping it ten feet from its anchorage, he dropped over the ledge.

He was not wrong; the cattle thieves saw it and acted with speed. Boyce's partner came out of the cave to pick the intruder off his swinging perch. He looked upward, then raised his rifle.

Tebo Sterling saw the square ugly face below him just as the slack in the rope tautened with a jerk, leaving him swinging a full ten feet above the man's head. The man was taking aim, expecting Sterling to slide smoothly down the rest of the distance, a sitting duck for an easy shot.

Sterling fooled him. He turned loose the rope and dropped the remaining distance to the ledge. He landed rolling, and would have fallen the fifty feet from the ledge to the next lower outcrop of rock if he had not grabbed the man's leg as he rolled near him.

The man braced himself, and his finger contracted on the trigger of his rifle. The gun roared and lead sent chips of stone flying into Sterling's eyes. Sterling held his grip on the man's leg, his own feet dangling over the cliff. He hoisted himself up and rolled back onto the ledge, just as the man freed his leg and aimed his rifle again.

Sterling rolled toward the man, clawing at his own gun, knowing that he did not have time to get it into action in time. He

could only bump against the man's shins as the man triggered. He felt a burning pain go through one of his legs, but he had thrown the man's aim off enough to give him another moment of life, and time to get his gun out.

The man lost his head. Having missed twice, he clubbed his gun and tried to beat Sterling's brains out with the stock. The walnut butt of the rifle thudded against Sterling's head and jolted him to his very toes. It left him dizzy and half blinded.

STERLING tried to get to his feet, pulling himself up on the leg of the renegade who was desperately fighting him off. His wounded leg felt paper weak, and when the man shoved him backward, the leg gave way and he was down again.

The man backed off to give himself room, and raised his rifle deliberately, intent in finishing his job this time.

Sterling aimed his gun now through eyes that wouldn't focus, and pulled the trigger just as the weight of the third slug sent him rolling toward the lip of the ledge.

His foot caught in a gnarled pine sapling and he saved himself. The man's rifle had dribbled out of his hands, and his knees were buckling. When he fell, he hit the rim of the ledge, and his body hurtled, feet over head down onto the rocks below.

At the sound of a foot disturbing a stone,

[Turn page]

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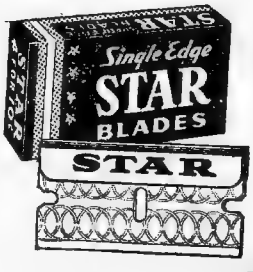

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Sterling looked back at the cave mouth in time to see Boyce himself, with his rifle coming to his shoulder, and the face behind it contorted into a cold killing rage.

Sterling whipped his gun around, and his lucky shot blew the Winchester out of Boyce's hand and slammed it back into the cave. Then Sterling seized the moment to try to get to his feet again.

He managed to get up, but the wound in his leg had sapped its strength, and he could stand only by leaning against the stone wall of the cave entrance. His face was bloody from the chips of stone buried under the skin, and his head felt like a great mass of pulp from the rifle blows. He could not stand, nor could he bring his eyes to focus on the blurred figure of the man in front of him.

But he knew that the man was backing away, clearing leather with his hand gun, and talking at the same time. The words drifted to him as from a great distance.

"Yuh're Tebo Sterling. You and me done time together, feller," Boyce said. "There ain't no use in us fightin'. I could make things pretty soft for yuh around here, if yuh'd only git some sense. There ain't no use in us shootin' it out, when we could work together, now is there?"

"Don't talk—shoot, if yuh're goin' to!" Sterling snapped. "There ain't room for both of us here on my range. *My* range, I said. So shoot or throw down yore gun."

"Yuh can't even see me," Boyce countered persuasively. "Yuh're dead on yore feet already. I could kill yuh the first shot. But I'm givin' yuh a choice—"

"I named my choice," Sterling answered, desperately trying to see through the fog that clouded his eyes. "We people in this valley don't make any compromise with the likes of you. Might's well drop yore gun, Boyce. They'll get yuh sooner or later anyway."

"Yuh're a fool," Boyce said, and while he spoke the muscles in his finger tightened on the trigger of his pistol.

Tebo Sterling felt the blow of the slug tear through him, felt himself flung viciously against the cavern wall. He was down, and he knew he would stay down this time.

The image of Lige Boyce was vague, indistinct, and the gun was heavy in Tebo Sterling's hand, but there was a kind of exultation in his heart, and it was only this exultation that kept him alive. His gun would not stand steady as he aimed it at the crouching, advancing Boyce. But he triggered the weapon with a kind of wild joy that drove out all consciousness of pain.

The walls rocked with the roar of their guns, and the sharp smell of gunpowder was pungent in his nose. It was a good smell. The dim figure of Boyce came unsteadily toward him, and presently it was squarely above him. In the echo of their guns' final explosions, Tebo Sterling saw the form toppling just above him.

Then Lige Boyce fell squarely on Sterling, and the fall of the man knocked the last vestige of consciousness from Sterling's tortured body, and a black oblivion swept over him. He lay under the body of Boyce, the trace of a smile lifting one corner of his mouth, and complete repose smoothing the muscles of his face. . . .

IT WAS the pain caused by the jolting of an old Studebaker wagon bed without springs that brought him back to consciousness. He was a mass of aches and pains from the bruise on his head to the wound in his leg.

He heard the creaking of the rolling wagon wheels and the clink of the harness, and he heard the thumping of many hoofs. Neighbors were driving the herd which they had recovered for Perkins.

He tried to raise his head and look around. He saw the vague forms of bodies up in the wagon bed under the driver's seat, all covered with tarpaulins.

Then he looked beside him, and Pete was lying there, grinning back at him.

"I win," Pete said. "I had a bet that seven bullet holes wasn't enough to kill yuh. Yuh sure picked yoreself a stage to put on yore act. Half the ranchers in this county sat back on their haunches and watched the bloodiest fight this county ever saw. Boy, yuh're a marked man! Yuh'll be gettin' all my pistol business, I'm afraid."

"I don't want any of it," Tebo replied, grinning back. "Unless some other coyotes like them come in and try to disturb the peace of my range."

Old Perkins pulled his horse up alongside the creaking wagon, and he had a smile for Tebo that was better than a week's rest.

"Son," he said. "I never cottoned to a man that was too handy with a gun before, but after what you done, well it's kinda comfortin' to know I got a neighbor to depend on in a tight."

Tebo Sterling felt something in his throat that interfered with his swallowing, yet he managed to speak: "Thanks, neighbor."

Then he closed his eyes, and his wounds didn't mean much to him right then.

The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

By CHUCK STANLEY

MANY a calf had gone through the "branding chute," and a good many "money beeves" were on the way to the slaughter houses in Kansas City and Chicago, before the "old moss-back" and the young "greenhorn" were able to settle down and relax one with his brown and scarred pipe, and the other with a chewed pencil stub and his notebook for the discussion of "bronc-riders" of ranch and rodeo.

"One thing you've got to bear in mind," began the maverick, "is the fact that a 'bronc-buster' was right proud of his profession. He was a king pin in the 'bucking-and-busting' business, and everyone on a ranch recognized that. There were almost as many words for a bronc-buster as there are for a ranch cook, and that's something, because since cowboys first started chasing 'muleys' most of them have been trying to think up names to call the ranch cook."

The "pilgrim" was well aware of this, and several dozen of the more familiar and printable names for the "cookie" had gone into his records. In the case of the "buster" he discovered that they were just as readily known as "rough-string riders," "bronc-twisters," "bronc-snappers," "bronc-peelers," "jinete," "flash-riders," "bull-bats" and "bronc-squeezers."

The "Contract-Buster"

"Most big ranches had one or two 'bronc-busters' on the payroll," pointed out the old-timer, "but the smaller ones usually took the services of a 'contract-buster.' As the name indicates, he was the sort of a 'rough-rider' who would come around regularly, and agree to break a certain number of broncs at a fixed price. You don't have to debate the fact that a bronc-buster had plenty of nerve and raw courage. He literally wasn't afraid of man or beast. He proved that to any man who disagreed with him; and he didn't have to prove it to the horse, because most cayuses, like any other animal, know when a man is afraid of them, and the first time this happens, there's no contest. The horse will always 'bust' the man."

The "pilgrim" nodded soberly, and the "mossy-horn" went on to tell his willing pupil that a "bronc-rider" never mounted a horse. He always "topped" him, "forked" him, "stepped-across the kak," or "hair-pinned the hull."

Before he did this, the saddling operation was usually in the hands of a "hazer" whose job it was to "blind" the bucker with a burlap bag or a cloth. Where no cloths were handy, the "hazer" frequently "eared down" the bronc, which consisted of holding the horse with his head to the ground by gripping both ears.

The "waddy" doing the saddle-mounting job never described it in just those terms. He "put the wood on," "screwed down the kak," or "laced up the tree."

Once these preliminaries were completed, and the "buster" was aboard and with a rein or a halter rope in his hands, he had a colorful group of phrases for cutting loose from the hazers and saddlers.

He might tell them simply to "shoot," or he might ask to have the animal "turned loose," "thrown off" or "let go."

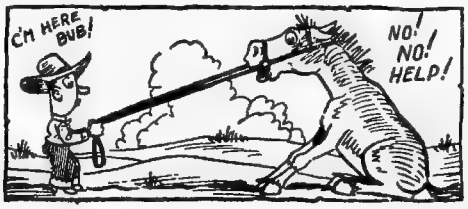
Most good "bronc-busters" paid most of their attention to the horse under them, but they couldn't all ignore the advice of the "peelers" or "rannies" on the top-rail "opera house" of the corral, or in a rodeo arena. These Westerners invariably suggested that the "bronc-squeezer" "cinch her when she bucks," "bust her wide open," "rake her with the hooks," "tickle her feet," "rise to the trot," and "scratch her."

Two Types of Bronc Busters

"There have always been two schools of 'bronc-busters'," declared the old-timer. "Some of them figured that the only way to

Our Tenderfoot Discusses Ranch and Rodeo Riders!

'break' a horse was to literally break its spirit. These came to be known as 'horse-breakers'. The other school was the one known as 'gentlers.' They figured, and it was the wise way, too, that a horse might have a mind and spirit of its own, and that a high-spirited animal might prove a valuable servant, as long as it realized that man was the



boss. This type of 'bronc-scratcher' is by far the most numerous today."

"The lingo of the rider when he is in the rodeo arena is tied up to some extent with the rules set down for competition riding," the old-timer went on to explain. "A cowboy in such a contest is disqualified or loses points when his foot comes out of the stirrup, when he changes hands on the rein or loses his rein, if he is bucked off, or fails to scratch the mount. He also loses out if he wraps the reins around his hand, grabs any part of the saddle with his hands, or strikes the horse with his hat or his hand."

Our Pilgrim Is Ambitious

This information was interesting to the "pilgrim," since he was always seeing the ranch's "bronc-peelers" working out with the regular stock, and preparing for the local rodeos in which they frequently took part. He also had hopes of being able to engage in this activity himself.

He discovered that "scratching" was the cowboy's description of the kicking motion of the spurs, or boot-heels, while riding a bucking horse in competition. Some cowboys also described this as "raking."

A good "raker" was able to roll his spur "rowels" from shoulder to rump, and could count on a high point score for this accomplishment in rodeo competition.

"Coasting on the spurs" was one way of losing plenty of points. It was a good way to keep from falling off the horse, however, since the rider who "coasted" was mounted with his spurs hooked into the cinch or under the horse's shoulder blades. Some of the boys who didn't go in for "coasting," did use a variation known as "screwing down the spurs," which consisted of setting the spurs in the cinch and not moving them at all.

Most contestants didn't try to use these subterfuges, however, preferring to "bicycle," which was the method of "scratching" with one foot, then the other, as though he were pedalling the old two-wheeler. Other boys "curried him out," when they picked a tough bronc, and this consisted of raking with the spurs. Some horses were "reefed" or "combed" with the "heel-irons."

A cowboy who did more than the average spurring was described as "throwing the steel" or "throwing the hooks," and the marks left on the unwilling hide of his animal were known as "hundred-and-elevens."

There are any number of times in actual range-bronc-busting, and in the competitions, when a rider used no spurs at all. This was more frequently seen in the ranch breaking corrals. Here the "gentler" felt that a spur might make his job more difficult, rather than simplify it. Such riders were known as "slick-heels," and they were therefore said to be "riding slick-heeled" or merely "riding slick."

The boys who spent all of their "bronc-busting" days on the ranch were described as "riding the range," while those who left home frequently for the rodeo circuit were said to be "riding the shows."

Once a cowboy managed to get into his saddle and set his spurs for the ride, there was a colorful group of phrases that ex-

plained how his riding appealed to his cowhand companions, invariably his severest critics. First of these was the expression, "riding safe" which indicated that the "waddy" was well down in his saddle, had his legs well gripped against the horse's sides, and his spurs hooked into the cinch.

A rider who followed the popular Eastern style of "posting" was said to be "seeing daylight" each time he left his seat with the jump of his horse.

"Close to the Plaster"

Some "safe" riders were also spoken of as "sitting close to the plaster," using a "close seat," or "hooked to his horse." Naturally the more accomplished "bronc-peelers" scorned anything of this kind, knowing that such riding didn't bring them any local fame, or attract attention in the big time rodeo contests.

They preferred to be seen "riding straight up," which meant that they were erect in the saddle, gripping the reins in one hand, and holding the other one straight up in the air. This was also described as "riding with a slick saddle," in other words without any help from a "saddle roll," "hobbled stirrups," or "grabbing the nubbin."

The Saddle Roll

"What's a saddle roll?" interrupted the tenderfoot.

The old-timer laughed. Then replied:

"Some folks may think it's something like a Parker House roll, or one of them stirrup cups the Eastern dudes drink out of before they start out on a fox hunt, but it's nothing like that. A saddle roll was a gadget cooked up by some bronc riders to get an advantage over a tough horse, when range-breaking him. These waddies couldn't sit a horse with the seat of their pants and the pinch of their knees, so they took a roll of blankets and tied it across the saddle, just behind the horn. This wedged the rider down in the saddle, and he had to be pried loose to fall out."

The "pilgrim" joined the "maverick" in his laughing, and decided that such a cowboy must be a really cautious hombre, unless his horse was actually a tough one. The discussion continued, and the "arbuckle" discovered that these rolls were also known as "bucking rolls."

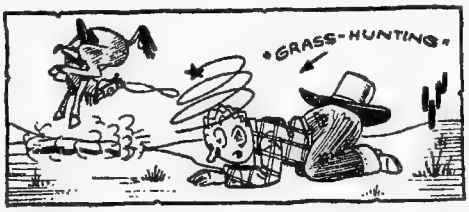
On the range, the description of the work of the "bronc-peeler" had almost as many names as the "bronc-twister" himself. When in action, the "bronc-buster" was said to be "taking the kinks out," "topping him off," "setting his hair," "kicking the frost out," "smoothing the humps out," "uncorking him," "working him over," "unroostering," and "ironing him out." The last expression was frequently employed when spurs or other serious means were used in the operation.

The Cowboy Didn't Always Win

Naturally the cowboy wasn't always the victor in these competitions with unbroken or half-broken cayuses, and the Winchells and Woollcotts of the West had their own colorful dialogue for describing the downfall of their busting brethren.

A horse in the process of sending his rider through the air was described as "unloading the buster," "turning loose the pack," or "sending him to join the bird gang."

Equally descriptive word pictures were drawn of the discomfited "ranny" who was "busting the breeze" in a fashion he had



seldom anticipated. He was said to be "dumped," "landed," "chucked or spilled."

Frequently this explanation of his plight was made more colorful when he happened to land on his face, and scraped his nose along the ground for a bit. Such an unfortunate was said to be "chewing gravel," "grass-hunting," "eating dirt," "kissing the ground," or "biting the dust."

Naturally, we all know, that in Indian-fighting days, "biting the dust" had a much more serious meaning to the average Westerner.

When a cowboy flew through the air with the greatest of ease and didn't necessarily scrape up the ground with his nose, he was frequently described as "landing on his sombrero" (or his J. B.; or his Stetson); or said to be "sunning his moccasins."

The top-flight bronc-busters who succeeded in keeping their grip on the mount until he was "gentled" in the ranch corral, or until the signal at a rodeo, was rewarded in numerous oral descriptions.

Sometimes he was spoken of as "riding him out." Then again he "stayed in his tree," or "stayed in the kak," or "gripped the leather."

A Horse "Pitches"

Since a cowboy was scored on the type of bucking he got from his horse, in competitions the boys figured methods of exciting

[*Turn page*]

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the horses. One of these was known as "thumbing." This was the practice of jabbing the animal with the thumb to make him act up. Bronc-busting was another type of Western activity in which the Texans differed from their neighbors in other states as to lingo. A Texan's horse never "bucks," he always "pitches."

On the range there were a number of colorful bits of dialogue that do not crop up in the rodeo arena, but they are an important part of the language of the Western horseman.

Frequently when cowboys were on a roundup or a trail drive, the safety of a herd at night depended upon the waddies getting into their saddles in a hurry, and heading for the "bed-ground." When a cowboy started toward his animal, whether he happened to be at a hitch-rack, in a corral, or on a rope picket line, he was said to be "making for his horse."

If he mounted the animal on the run, he was spoken of as "taking a run." The old-timer explained that many people think that "taking a run" means the act of riding, particularly at a trot, canter or gallop, but it is simply the business of climbing aboard a horse while the animal or the man is in motion. When the cowboy hit his saddle without benefit of stirrups, the action was known as a "flying mount."

This was also called a "running mount," and in a rodeo or Wild West show was frequently featured as a "Pony Express mount."

Frequently it was necessary for a cowboy to ride his horse up steep bluffs, or down the sides of ravines, in order to locate missing cattle. Such actions were described as "scratching gravel". If the horsebacker was merely out for the ride, or taking a casual jaunt into town, his fellows spoke of him as "jiggling" or "racking."

The "pilgrim" entered this information in his notebook, and stood with pencil poised,

but when the old-timer knocked the grey dottle out of his browned corn-cob pipe, and began to replace it in the leather pocket of his brush jacket, he knew that the latest session of the frontier lingo school was about to be adjourned for the night. He thanked the "mossy-back" for his help. The old-timer smiled happily, and said:

"That's okay, Mister. You're a good listener, and we've still got a heap of palavering to do, before you're a cow-country Webster for sure."

With his comment, the oddly-assorted couple broke up to meet with us some time later on.

THEM CONSARNED LONGHORNS

By TEX MUMFORD

THEM danged dogies could do some awful strange things—them old Texas longhorns that built the West from sod hut to pre-fabricated silo. They have been replaced on the ranges by such fancy-sounding critters as Durhams, Herefords, and Polled Anguses. Of course, the new blue-ribbon stuff has to be fenced in and fed up on soy-bean cereal to make bigger and better steak. But if it comes to walking, you need a good old longhorn, and the old-time steer sure had a lot of footwork to do.

The drovers never could figure out what would happen on the market drives! A story is told about a herd that woke up every single night at eleven o'clock sharp and went on the stampede—just like sleep-walkers. There was no way of curing the critters.

And there's another true yarn about a herd of longhorns that was sold time and time again by the same man. Not long after this herd was taken off on the trail by the buyer, they all stampeded home again and mixed up with the range stock.

One trail outfit got its herd well trained to follow the chuck wagon on the drive north to Wyoming. When the boys reached the Oregon Trail, they were in trouble. Every time a wagon passed, the herd got to following it.

Sometimes the longhorns would be spooked at the most insignificant items and refuse to budge a step. A barbed wire fence with the sun glinting on it would halt the hull caboodle, and there they would stand for days. Sun rippling on water would halt a herd on the banks of a river, and nothing would make the critters cross until they made up their mind. A plowed furrow would turn an entire herd aside and start it going in the wrong direction. And they just wouldn't cross a railroad track.

But of all the things that puzzled a longhorn more than any other, that was the sight of a cowboy on foot. According to longhorn intelligence, that puncher just had to be growed with a horse under him!

Judson's horseshoe hit the barrel of the Colt

THE SHERIFF RINGS A KILLER

By JACKSON COLE

When Sheriff Sam Judson has his lucky horseshoe in his shirt, it's time for tough hombres to be plumb careful!

IT WAS quiet and warm out in back of the small adobe building that was the Rocky Gulch jail, but not too warm for the game of "barnyard golf" that was going on. However, Sheriff Sam Judson's shirt was wet with perspiration as he picked a horseshoe to toss. He was a tall man, and fat, and this game he was playing with his deputy added up to quite a bit of exercise for a hot day.

"How do we stand now, Lefty?" Judson asked the deputy. He was standing behind the steel stake that had been driven into the ground, aiming at another stake just like it sixty feet away. "Six—four, ain't it?"

"That's right, Sheriff." Lefty Doyle nodded. "Yuh made one ringer—that gave yuh five points—then yuh got a closest which gave yuh one more point. I made a leaner and a closest which brought me four."

"Like I thought," said the sheriff, nodding.

Slowly and deliberately he tossed the horseshoe. It went sailing through the air, dropped. It hit the post with a clang of metal against metal, whirled around, then slid to the bottom of the stake.

"Ringer!" Doyle shouted. "Shucks, Sam it just don't look like I'll ever be able to beat you, nohow."

"That was my third toss," said Judson complacently. "Yore turn, Lefty."

He stepped back as the deputy moved to the stake holding three horseshoes in his right hand—naturally. Doyle was called "Lefty" for the obvious reason that he was left-handed. Taking one of the horseshoes in that left hand he made his throw. The horseshoe landed about a foot to the left of the far stake.

"Hey—you can do better'n that!" the

sheriff called encouragingly. "You ain't half tryin'."

Doyle, a lean, raw-boned middle-aged man didn't say anything. But there was a look of concentration on his rugged face as he got ready for a second toss. He had just lifted the horseshoe when out on the street on the other side of the jail came gunshots—two of them. Spaced close together. It was a loud, startling sound in the hot silence. Doyle spat out a curse and dropped the two horseshoes to the ground. For an instant he stood poised, ready to leap with action.

"Trouble!" exclaimed the sheriff. "And we ain't even wearin' our guns."

THEY were good lawmen, and far from fools, so they didn't go running out into the street unarmed. Instead, they headed on the run for the back door of the jail, raced through it and pounded on to the sheriff's office in the front of the building. Yanking their gun-belts from wall pegs, they buckled them on.

"Folks gatherin' across the street," called Judson, as he glanced out an open window. "Looks like trouble at the bank, Lefty!"

"Holdup, mebbe!" barked the deputy.

But Sheriff Judson was already through the door and heading across the dusty street, moving fast and light-footedly for a fat man. Deputy Doyle was close behind him as they reached a small group of men in front of the Rocky Gulch Bank.

They were all facing a husky young fellow in range clothes, and two of them were covering him with guns. Judson knew the young fellow—"Buck" Warren, a cowman who owned a small spread over east of the town.

"What's happened here?" demanded the sheriff as he drew up short.

"Why Warren here tried to rob the bank, that's what!" shouted one of the men with guns. His name was Dan Marvin, and he was one of the biggest ranchers thereabouts. "He shot and killed Frank Harper, the teller, Sheriff, and was just gettin' away when I stopped him outside the door!"

"That's a lie!" Warren said coldly. "Sheriff Judson, when I went into the bank, the first thing I saw as the teller on the floor, with a bag of money beside him. I grabbed up the bag and lit out to find you. Didn't seem right to leave that *dinero* for just anybody to pick up. I ran into Marvin at the door, and he fired two shots at me, without askin' me any questions. Reckon I was lucky he missed."

The lawman nodded. It had always been his policy to figure a man innocent until proved guilty, but he had to admit Buck Warren's story did sound thin. Why would anyone kill the teller and hightail, leaving a bag of money in plain sight?

"Afraid I'll have to arrest yuh and hold yuh on suspicion till this is cleared up, Buck," he said. "Sorry, son, but that's the way of it."

"Don't worry, Sheriff," Dan Marvin put in importantly. "This killer won't give yuh any trouble—not while me and my foreman got our guns on him anyhow."

Judson just looked at the big, square-faced owner of the Cross In A Box outfit. Dan Marvin always had acted like he ruled the roost around Sage County, just because he owned the biggest ranch in that section. Frankly, Sheriff Judson didn't like the man, and he had no love for Chet Barr, the little gunslick who was Marvin's foreman, either.

"Put yore gun away, Marvin," Judson said mildly. "That means you, too, Barr. Up to now me and Doyle been able to handle our prisoners without help. Reckon we aim to keep it that way."

Scowling, Marvin thrust his gun back into holster, as he grunted something. His foreman also dropped his Colt into leather.

Warren heaved a sigh as the sheriff walked over to him.

"I shore didn't aim to tangle with the Law," he said.

Judson and Doyle took Warren over to the jail and locked him in a cell. None of the three said much, but the sheriff was doing a lot of thinking. Leaving the young rancher without a word, the fat lawman lumbered back to his office and sat down at his battered desk. Lefty Doyle dropped down on a chair, got out the "makin's," and rolled a quirly. The deputy was the first to speak.

"We heard two shots, and Marvin fired 'em," he said, after a thoughtful silence. "Yuh reckon Warren killed Frank Harper with a gun that don't make any noise, or a bow and arrow, or something, Sam?"

"All three of 'em," said Judson.

"Huh?" Doyle looked at his superior in surprise. "What yuh mean?"

"I've been wonderin' why we didn't hear three shots, just like you have, Lefty," the sheriff said. "Somethin' almighty strange about that." Groaning, he got to his feet. "Come on, Lefty. We better go look over the scene of the crime, as the feller says."

The two lawmen went over to the bank again. By now a crowd had collected in front of it, but someone had closed and locked the doors so no one could get inside. Jud-

son marched up to the door and pounded on it.

"It's the sheriff!" he called loudly. "Open up!"

SOMEONE inside the bank unlocked the doors, and Adam Harper, local undertaker and coroner, peered out at them. His eyes were red, and his face more lugubrious than it was naturally. The two lawmen entered swiftly and Harper slammed and locked the door in the faces of the crowd. The undertaker was a tall, thin man who looked like a living advertisement for his own business.

"I'm shore glad yuh got here, Sheriff," he said hastily. "This is worse'n yuh thought. Not only was my brother Frank killed, but I just found Grayson dead back in his office!"

"Grayson!" exclaimed the sheriff. "Good gravy! Martin Grayson!"

Martin Grayson was president and owner of the Rocky Gulch bank, and an important man in that part of the country. Judson hurried into the banker's private office. Grayson was lying slumped down at his desk, a bullet in his heart.

"We didn't hear any four shots either," Doyle remarked dryly, as he stood behind Judson while they gazed at the body. "Yuh reckon we're gettin' deaf?"

"Mebbe." The sheriff shrugged. "But it shore looks like it's up to us to prove we ain't dumb, too." He frowned. "Grantin' that Buck Warren did rob the bank, Lefty, why would he come into this private office and shoot Grayson first?"

"You tell me," said Doyle. "I ain't much better at riddles than I am at pitchin' hoss shoes. Why?"

"I don't know yet," Judson said firmly. "But I shore aim to find out."

"Why did Warren have to kill Frank?" asked Adam Harper plaintively. "Frank was a good bank clerk, a mighty fine feller, but he wasn't a fighter. He told me plenty times that if the bank was ever held up he wouldn't risk his life tryin' to battle no bandits."

"And yet Frank was killed," said Sheriff Judson. "There's somethin' mighty strange about this here whole thing." He looked at Doyle, and nodded. "You take charge, Lefty. If Harper here wants to move the bodies to the undertakin' parlor, see that he gets help to do it."

Even as the sheriff spoke he was gazing thoughtfully at two half-smoked cigars in an ash tray on the banker's desk. They looked like expensive cigars.

"Yuh can go out the back door, Sheriff," Harper spoke up. "I'll unlock it for yuh."

Judson nodded. "I'm goin' back to the jail, Lefty. Want to be shore somebody's guardin' the prisoner."

"Yuh think Buck Warren might try to get away?" asked Doyle.

"Not exactly," the sheriff said slowly. "But I figger somebody might try to take him away."

Judson left the bank by the rear door. He went around in front of the building. Some of the crowd had dispersed, but a small group of men stood on the plank walk listening, as Dan Marvin talked to them earnestly.

"You all know what we do with killers in this part of the country," the sheriff heard the owner of the Cross In A Box saying. "We string 'em up to the nearest tree!"

"That's right," shouted a man in the crowd, that was fast warming up as they listened to the rancher's harangue. "What are we waitin' for? Get a rope, somebody!"

"I figger you gents better calm down," Sheriff Judson said coldly, as he joined the men in front of the bank. "There ain't been any lynchin' while I've been sheriff—and there ain't goin' to be any!"

There were angry murmurs from the crowd. Judson didn't like the way those men were acting. It looked as if Marvin had them really stirred up.

"Remember what I say," the sheriff went on grimly. "Anybody who tries to take that prisoner away from me and my deputy stops lead!"

He turned away, and stalked back toward the jail and his office. As he passed the local blacksmith shop he noticed that it was closed, and remembered seeing the blacksmith with the mob. He remembered others, also, and the situation grew more ominous.

Judson's mein was determined as he entered his office, got a pair of handcuffs and went back to Buck Warren's cell. The young cowman was the only prisoner in the jail.

"Folks are talkin' of a hangin' out on the street," the sheriff told Warren as he unlocked the cell door. "I'm goin' to hide yuh somewheres else, Buck, till things quiet down." He frowned. "Want yuh to know yuh're still my prisoner, though, so I'm puttin' on these handcuff's."

Warren didn't protest or try to struggle as Judson snapped on the handcuffs. Then the sheriff led him out of the back door of the jail. They went along the back of the buildings until they reached the rear of the blacksmith shop.

"In here," Judson said, as he found a back door open. "Want yuh to stay here till I see

if I can get things cleared up, Buck. Will yuh promise me yuh won't leave?"

"All right, Sheriff," Warren said slowly. "I promise. But what if some of the mob should find me here. I wouldn't stand a chance, handcuffed, unarmed, and alone."

THE sheriff hesitated, then drew his gun and handed it to his prisoner. Warren stared at the lawman in amazement as he took the Colt.

"Provin' I'm trustin' yuh, Buck," Judson said soberly. "Reckon that'll protect yuh if there's trouble."

Nodding, he went out the back door and hurried along to the rear of the jail. The sun, bright and hot, gleamed on the horseshoes that he and Lefty had been pitching when the trouble started. That seemed a long time ago to the sheriff, but he figured it hadn't been more than an hour at most.

He saw his lucky horseshoe lying at his feet and on impulse picked it up. Unbottoning his shirt, he thrust the horseshoe inside. Maybe it was lucky, as Lefty so often said. If that was so he had never needed it more than he did now.

Judson lifted his head as he heard voices out in front of the jail. He had locked the front door when he had gone to get his prisoner, and now someone was shouting and pounding on it.

"A lynch mob all right!" Judson muttered tightly. "Come to get Buck. And no time now for me to get another gun!"

With no further hesitation he hurried along in back of the buildings to the undertaking establishment and slipped through the back door. The place was deserted, though the bodies were there. Evidently Adam Harper had gone to see what all the excitement was at the jail.

As a thought struck Judson, he began a hurried search through the desk in Harper's office. To his satisfaction he found what he was looking for—a letter addressed to Adam Harper, and from the dead bank president. The sheriff read it, nodded grimly as he put the letter into his pocket.

"Figgered it might be somethin' like that," he muttered. "Now I got to clean things up around here."

He stepped out into the street through the front door, and stood there listening. From the blacksmith shop came the sound of hammering on metal. Judson cursed.

Warren! Probably trying to get free of the handcuffs. But the noise would attract the blacksmith and the rest of the mob who by now had broken into the jail and found the prisoner missing.

"The blacksmith shop!" a man was instantly shouting as he tore down the street with others roaring after him.

"Warren must be in there!" yelled another. "That's where the sheriff hid him and he's tryin' to get free!"

Sheriff Judson ducked back, raced down an alley and along the back of the buildings. He had to get in that blacksmith shop by the back door before the mob poured in from the front!

As Judson reached the back door, he peered in. Buck Warren was standing at the anvil, pounding at the chains of the handcuffs with a heavy hammer. He had managed to get one wrist free.

Abruptly the front door was burst opened and Dan Marvin lunged in, with Adam Harper and other men behind him.

"Got yuh, Warren!" shouted Marvin. "Yuh're goin' to hang for them killin's!"

Warren straightened up, the heavy hammer in one hand, the gun in the other. He flung up the gun, aiming it straight at the owner of the Cross In A Box. Judson reached inside his shirt and pulled out the lucky horseshoe.

"Come any closer and I'll shoot to kill!" Warren snapped.

Marvin just laughed and moved forward. Judson's horseshoe went flying through the air. It hit the barrel of the Colt in Warren's hand and knocked the gun up just as it roared.

"We ain't goin' to have any more shootin'!" yelled Judson, as he bounced forward. "Or any lynchin' either! Buck Warren didn't rob the bank, he didn't kill Frank Harper and Martin Grayson, and I can prove it!"

"Go ahead, Sheriff," Marvin said weakly. He was realizing how close he had come to being shot. If Judson hadn't hit Warren's gun with the horseshoe he might be headed for Boot Hill right now. "We're listenin'."

"Grayson killed Frank Harper," Judson said soberly, staring at the undertaker. "Frank had been stealin' money from the bank and Grayson found out about it. The banker wrote a letter to Frank's brother, Adam Harper, sayin' he knew the teller had been stealin' bank money."

"That's a lie!" shouted Harper. "Yuh can't prove anything like that, Sheriff!"

"Oh, yes I can. Here's the letter Grayson wrote yuh, Adam."

Judson drew it out of his pocket. Over the heads of the men he saw his deputy, Lefty Doyle, standing in the doorway listening.

"Yore brother must have gone loco when he learned he was discovered, Harper," the sheriff said somberly. "Reckon he tried to get Grayson, and the banker killed him in self-defense. Probably happened in Grayson's office which has thick walls and a heavy door. Not much chance of hearin' a shot fired in there outside the bank."

"Then who killed Grayson?" demanded Adam Harper.

"You did," the sheriff said sternly. "Yuh paid him what he must have thought was a friendly visit right after yore brother was killed. I reckon Grayson told yuh what had happened. Anyway yuh both had time to smoke half a cigar—the cigars I saw in Grayson's office."

HARPER'S eyes were darting about nervously.

"Why should I kill Grayson?" he demanded.

"Because yuh didn't want him to tell the truth about yore brother bein' a thief," accused Judson. "Yuh shot and killed Grayson in his office. Then yuh decided to make it look like a bank robbery, so yuh put yore brother's body out in the bank and left a bag of money near it."

"But how would that make it look like a bank robbery?" demanded Marvin, the rancher.

"It was supposed to look like Grayson and Harper died protectin' the bank," explained the sheriff. "And that the robbers got away without bein' seen, scared off mebbe, before they could grab their loot. Warren was the first customer this mornin'. He found Frank Harper's body just like he said, and was rushin' out to look for me when Marvin saw him."

"Looks like I made a big mistake and near got killed doin' it," Dan Marvin said ruefully. "Mebbe this'll learn me not to think a man is guilty until I'm plumb shore about it."

"I always figger a man is innocent till he's proved guilty," said Judson, grinning at Buck Warren, who grinned back at him. "Even if I have to throw a hoss shoe at him to show I'm right."

Doyle strode forward and took Adam Harper a prisoner. The crowd slowly drifted away, all thoughts of lynching gone from their minds.

"Now we got another prisoner to take care of till the case goes to trial," said Doyle with a sigh. "Shucks, just looks like we never will get a chance to finish that game of hoss shoes, Sheriff."

"NONE O' YOUR FINE TEXAS TALK! JOIN US RIGHT NOW—OR I'LL SHOOT YUH DOWN!"

SURPRISED on the Montana range by vengeful Brig Murphy, Hondo Uvalde, cowboy from the Border country, found himself in a tight spot. But he kept his nerve—and continued his defiance.

"Take that cussed gun off me afore I ram it down your gullet," said Hondo. "If yuh're done palaverin', yuh better travel."

"Hold it!" There was a steel, cutting edge to Brig Murphy's voice. "I ain't totin' guns for ornaments. If we can't get along I'll shoot yuh right here in yore fancy tracks!"

Hondo looked up at Murphy and realized he was really up against a tough proposition.

"I could say I'll throw in and doublecross yuh later," he suggested calmly.

"If yuh get the chance," said the land-grabber. "But right now—"

Murphy had no chance to finish what he had to say, for Uvalde turned the tables suddenly in a way that will surprise you mightily in TOUGH TEXAS TOP-HAND, by Del Rayburn, a novelet packed with quick-trigger action!

It's the kind of a yarn that keeps you on edge from start to finish—and you'll be sure to enjoy it in our next issue as you follow Hondo Uvalde's valiant fight for justice against big odds!

Remember—TOUGH TEXAS TOP-HAND—next issue!

A Winchester cracked and Bailey sprawled his length on the floor

JURY FOR JUNIPER

By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

Trial by gunsmoke was the verdict for nesters, but "Juniper Jim" of Fox Butte sure believed in fighting fire with fire!

CHAPTER I

Warning

JIM MALONE hunkered down in the dying sunlight before his shack, and watched the approaching dot become a horse and rider.

Behind them stretched the wide flat of Jericho valley, great holes of emerald showing in its sagebrush covering. Scattered here and there over the valley floor were homesteaders' shacks.

Six months ago there had been no holes in the sagebrush carpet and no shacks. At that time Jim could have had half a section of valley land, but instead he'd insisted on settling among the junipers on top of Fox Butte. They laughed at him down there in the valley just as the townsfolk in Ashfork laughed, and had fastened the name "Juniper Jim" upon him.

It had been the locator, Zeb Crofitt, who had laughed first and had thought of the

A COMPLETE ACTION NOVELET

name "Juniper Jim." Crofitt had ridden out from Ashfork with Jim, and had wanted to locate him at the western end of Jericho valley, but Jim had taken a look at the long stretch of sagebrush flat, then he'd looked at Fox Butte, and he'd said that was where he was going to live.

Zeb Cofitt had thrown back his head and laughed mightily.

"Don't be a fool, Malone," he'd said. "That's no place to dry farm. You've got to haul everything you buy in town up a long grade, and you've got a tougher job clearing the land with them junipers on it than you'd have down here in the valley."

Jim's jaw had set stubbornly.

"I'm not going to live in the valley where I'm all penned in. I'm going to build my house on the top of the butte where I can see something."

"Before you make up your mind," the locator had urged, "let's ride up there and take a look."

When they had reached the top of the butte, Crofitt pointed north.

"Now look at that, Malone. Besides the other reasons I gave you, there's another mighty good one why you've got no business filing on this chunk of hill. Down there's Dry Canyon. I'm guessing you'd lose about forty acres in rimrock and canyon bottom that ain't worth a damn. Mebbe less, but anyhow, what's the sense of taking this piece when there's several nice half-sections down there in the valley?"

Jim Malone had turned his back to Dry Canyon. He'd stood looking out across Jericho valley, breathing deeply.

"Get a whiff of that ozone, Crofitt. Heady just like wine. This is it. Here's where I'm going to live."

"Dang it, Malone!" Crofitt had exploded, "I've been locating settlers for years, and I never did see one as bone-headed as you! You won't listen to nothing. Besides all the things I've mentioned there's one more. Sure as you locate here you'll tangle with Orv Bailey's Bar O outfit, and you'll wind up full of holes. Every fall Orv sends a crew up here to cut wood in these junipers, this being the only bunch in the country. And don't think you'd last long bucking the tough hands Orv's got!"

"I've got a Winchester that shoots plumb straight, Crofitt. Now if you want a hundred dollars out of me, you'd better find my corners."

"All right, Juniper Jim." Crofitt had laughed sourly. "Go ahead. Be a fool."

That had happened six months ago. Now Malone had his shack, with a small barn behind it. He had a wagon and team, he'd cleared some ground, and he'd dug a well, but he wouldn't get in as much of a crop as the men in the valley would, and he wasn't so sure he was as smart as he'd thought. He had the ozone and the view, but a man couldn't fill his stomach on either.

Still, he thought stubbornly, Ann would like it up here, and besides, it had been a question whether he was going to settle where he wanted to or where Zeb Crofitt wanted him to. He hadn't liked Crofitt and he didn't like him now. It was worth something for a man to keep his independence, and he'd keep his if he starved.

THE rider was close enough for Jim Malone to see that it was Slim Priddy, one of Bailey's Bar O buckaroos. He stepped inside, buckled on his gun belt, left his Winchester just inside the door so it would be handy, and sat down again.

He knew Priddy had the reputation of being a tough hand, and he'd seen him kill a man last fall. This was the first attention Malone had had from Orv Bailey, so it wasn't likely Priddy meant to make trouble. Still and all, it was just as well to be ready. Jim didn't have any illusions about being a tough hand, but he didn't aim to be anybody's pushover, either.

Priddy reined up in front of Malone's shack.

"Howdy."

"Howdy," Jim said. "Get down and rest your saddle, Slim."

"Nope. I'm just up here to deliver a message for Orv. Been all the way through the valley, and I'd be on my way home if you hadn't got it into your noggin to settle way up here. I'd like to know why."

"There's a view," Malone said. Ann liked views, but a tough hand of Slim Priddy's caliber wouldn't know about what a girl like Ann would want.

"A view!" Priddy turned in his saddle and looked back over the valley. Then he looked down at Malone and shook his head. "Mebbe you're loco like they say. What good does a view do? Ain't you here to dry farm? You can't raise no wheat in a view."

No depth of understanding, Malone saw. Just a hardcase who could pitch five slugs out of a six-gun in a short time and fatal fashion.

"Now I reckon you're right," Malone agreed, "but besides the view there's the ozone."

"Ozone?" Priddy cuffed back his sweat-stained Stetson and scratched his head. "Never ate any."

"You don't eat it," Malone explained. "You breathe it."

"Now look," Priddy said in exasperation. "Mebbe I ain't full of big words like you are, but there's one sure thing that even an ignorant cuss like me knows. You don't breathe nothing but air, and brother, there's lots of it around here."

"Right," Malone agreed heartily. "Lots of it. That's what ozone is. Air. Pure and refreshing air."

"Oh." Priddy thought that over for a time. Then he laughed, and his eyes, Malone saw, were light blue and his lean, hard-lined face wasn't nearly as wicked as it had been the day he'd gunned the man in town. "Now that you've made a fool out of me, I ain't sure you're as big a fool as the folks in the valley say you are. Might be something to this view and ozone business. Anyhow you don't look all tired out from grubbing sagebrush and having kids like them valley grangers look."

"Climb down and have a drink," Malone said. "I see that I misjudged you, Slim. I could have talked all winter to those folks in the valley, and I never would have made them see as much as you have here in five minutes."

Slim Priddy climbed down without a third invitation, and took a long pull on the bottle Jim handed him.

"Aside from this view and ozone business, Malone," he asked, "why did you land up here?"

"I've got a girl," Jim said, "back in Idaho. I heard about this country that was settling up, and I said to Ann that this was the last chance we'd have. I'd been riding for an outfit for three years, Slim, and I wasn't getting anywhere, so I pulled stakes and came out. Ann's a girl such as you never saw. She likes things like views and ozone. I aim to raise a crop of kids and some wheat, but I'm going to do it where the kids can see out past the end of their pug noses." He rubbed his own nose. "Ann's got the cutest pug nose you ever saw, Slim. Her eyes are blue, a mite darker than yours, and her hair's real yellow."

"So you were a cowhand before you got clod-busting ideas," Priddy said thoughtfully. "I thought you was different than them square-heads in the valley."

Malone only half heard. The long evening shadows were across the valley now, and the distant hills were red with the transient touch of the sunlight. He was broke. Flat broke, and he was remembering how he'd stood with his arms around Ann's slim body that morning last fall before he'd got on the stage.

"Just a year, honey," he'd said. "I'll get a place going and a home that you'll be proud of. We'll have something where we can put our roots down and live a lifetime. A year's all I'll need."

"A year," Ann had whispered. "It will be a long year."

HE'D kissed her, and her eyes had been closed as if storing the memory of that last kiss. Then she'd opened her eyes and winked at him and kept on kissing him. Now he was broke. He had enough grub to last a week. Perhaps two, if he cut down on the prunes for dessert. He wouldn't get much crop in. He'd wind up by selling his team and wagon, and going back to Idaho to ride for his thirty a month and beans.

"I was going to bring her out here, Slim," Malone said. "She'd like the view and the ozone."

"Well, why don't you?" Slim asked enviously. "If I had a girl I wouldn't be fooling around. You're wasting the best years of your life, Jim. You ought to get started raising that crop of kids."

"I'm broke," Malone said flatly. "Plumb broke. Maybe I wasn't as smart as I figured. The view and the ozone don't fill a man's belly, and I sure couldn't get a loan on it in town."

"Hmmm," Slim said thoughtfully, "I never thought I'd say this to a clodbuster, but I'm gonna do it anyhow. I'll loan you a couple hundred which same is all I've got. That oughtta give you a hand. Go ahead and send for that girl."

Two hundred dollars! Malone's eyes widened. That would give him a hand all right, and maybe he wouldn't have to wait the year out. Then Slim's face hardened, and he began to swear.

"I reckon it's the ozone, Jim," the buckaroo said. "I plumb forgot what I came up here for. Orv Bailey sent me around to tell the grangers they'd better vamose if they didn't want trouble."

"We haven't hurt Bailey," Malone said. "Why is he warning us to get out?"

"Did you ever see a cowman who wanted a bunch of grangers moving in on his range?" Slim demanded. "Besides, you got him where it really hurt when you filed on this juniper patch. For years he's got his wood and posts and such from this butte."

Malone's jaw set stubbornly.

"He can still get his wood and posts up here if he wants to pay for them."

"Which same mebbe he'll do. Orv ain't no trouble-maker. Fact is, he'll go a long way to keep out of trouble, but he figgers he's getting tromped on. He says he'll turn some cattle in here on your grain if you don't vamose."

"Reckon I won't have much grain to worry about," Malone said bitterly.

Slim had swung back into the saddle.

"That loan offer I made still sticks," he said reluctantly, "but Orv would skin me if he heard about it. Reckon I'm something of a fool myself, but I kind o' like the cut of your jib. The only thing is Orv's plumb stubborn when he gets his mind set. If he really gets it into his head to move you off, he'll get you, one way or the other."

Slim nodded, and rode back down the butte. Malone watched him disappear into the dusk, thinking that sometimes tough hands weren't always as tough as their reputations, but he'd seen enough of Orv Bailey to know that what Slim had said about him was true. Anyhow, Jim was thinking, it didn't make much difference. If a man starved out on a homestead, there wouldn't be much fight left in him, and there wasn't much to fight for.

Then an idea hit Malone. Slim had said Orv Bailey would turn his cattle into Jericho valley, and none of the homesteaders had built any fence; partly because they'd been too busy clearing the sagebrush from their land and partly because they hadn't seen the immediate need of fences. Now they'd see the need. They'd want fence posts and they'd want them quick. That's where Juniper Jim Malone would come in. He'd furnish them with fence posts, and it should prove almost as profitable as a gold mine.

CHAPTER II

"You Pay Cash in Ashfork"

IT TOOK Jim Malone most of the next day to talk to the settlers in Jericho valley. By late afternoon the job was done, and he drove his team into Ashfork with a feeling of warm satisfaction in him. There wouldn't be much wheat raised on Fox Butte, but he wouldn't be starving out, and that was the main thing. He'd harvest his crop of juniper, and by fall he'd have money to jingle in his pocket. If he had any luck at all, he'd be sending for Ann before the year was out.

"You bet we're not letting Orv Bailey run us out of Jericho valley," the settlers had said. "We heard what Slim Priddy had to say, but we're sticking. You get those posts to us, and we'll build some fence that'll keep Bar O cattle out o' our grain. Then if Bailey wants to start cutting wire we'll see if he wants to burn some powder, too."

Fox Butte wasn't going to be such a bad place to make a home after all, Malone was thinking, and as he drove past Zeb Crofitt's office, he wondered what the little locator would think when he heard how much cash money the posts would be worth. Then, as he pulled up in front of Matt Royce's Mercantile, tied, and moved around the pole to the boardwalk, he found himself facing Crofitt.

"I was out to see you this afternoon," Crofitt said in an aggrieved tone. "You wasn't around anyplace."

In the six months since Jim Malone had settled on Fox Butte he had learned that Zeb Crofitt was a good deal more than a land locator. He sold real estate, he loaned money, and in one way or another he seemed to control most of the things that went on in Ashfork. He had a huge cigar tucked into one corner of his wide, thin-lipped mouth, his black eyes were narrowed as he pinned them on Malone, and there was about him the air of a man who expects obedience and who still resented Jim's refusal to take his advice when he had insisted on taking Fox Butte for his homestead.

"I was away," Malone said, and started to move around Crofitt.

"I've been wanting to see you," the locator said quickly, and stepped in front of the homesteader. "You were a blamed fool last fall, but I'm sure you see now why I told you to settle in the valley. There'll be a lot of grain raised down there, and those men will be fixed for next year. What are you going to live on, Juniper Jim?"

"Juniper berries," Malone said testily.

"I don't see any reason to get funny," Crofitt snapped. "I'm trying to do you a favor. When I was up there this afternoon you had just about as much land cleared as I thought you'd have. There are still a few good spots in the valley. I'll buy a relinquishment, and then I'll locate you free in the valley. I'll give you two hundred dollars."

"Not interested," Malone said, and again tried to step around the locator.

"I don't know why the devil I should try to help out a stubborn, bone-headed jasper

like you," Crofitt said in exasperation, "except that I want this country to grow, and we've got to have settlers who can make a living. I'll give you five hundred, and I'll send a man out to help you move your stuff."

"Look, Crofitt." Malone took the locator firmly by the shoulders, and lifted him to one side. "I'll explain this in simple terms. I don't want to move. I like Fox Butte. I want to go into the store." Then he released his grip on Crofitt and went on into Matt Royce's Mercantile.

Royce was a big man, easy-going, and slow of thought and speech. Jim Malone had never asked him for credit, but he knew Royce had put some of the settlers on his books. Jim ordered a sack of flour, a side of bacon, and a dozen cans of peaches.

"I'm getting so blasted tired of prunes," Jim said, "that I have to turn my head when I eat them. I can't look them in the face. I'll take this stuff out to the wagon, and you lay out a crosscut saw, a sledge, and a couple of wedges. I'll be back in a minute."

As Malone walked back along the counter, he saw that Zeb Crofitt had come in behind him.

"You aiming to cut wood for Orv Bailey?" Crofitt asked.

"No," Malone said, and went on by.

When he came into the store again Crofitt had moved up and was looking at the saw.

"I can't see what you'd want this stuff for," he said, "if you aren't aiming to cut wood."

"I thought I'd start a toothpick factory," Malone said, and turning his back to Crofitt, said, "Matt, I'd like to buy this stuff on tick. I'll have the money in a week or so."

Royce started to nod agreement, and suddenly, as if without thought on his part, finished by shaking his head. He was looking past Malone at Crofitt and it broke across Jim's mind in that split second that Royce was getting his instructions from the locator.

"Sorry, Juniper Jim," Royce said apologetically. "I've gone in kind o' heavy with some of 'em that have families in the valley. I've got to have cash."

WITHOUT turning his head, Malone spoke.

"Of course Crofitt wouldn't think much of my toothpick factory on account of his false teeth. You're different, Matt. I even figured you were more than half human which nobody ever said about Crofitt."

"You can have the grub," Royce said reluctantly, not looking at Crofitt. "This other stuff I've got to have cash for."

"If you need cash, Juniper," Crofitt said meaningly, "you know how you can get it."

"When I take cash from you for anything," Malone said, "I'll be down to eating juniper berries. Royce, I sure had you wrong. I thought you were a man, but I reckon you're just a puppy dog jumping to Crofitt's whistle."

"Mebbe if I knew what you wanted this stuff. . ." Royce began.

"I said I'd have the money inside of a week, or at the most two."

"I heard that, but if I knew just what you had in mind. . . ."

"It's no secret," Jim said coldly, and leaning forward so that Crofitt could not hear, he added in a low tone, "I'm cutting posts for the settlers."

"Posts?" Royce said in astonishment. "I didn't reckon they'd have time to put in a fence now. Besides, I thought they'd go to the mountains for their posts this fall."

Crofitt had to know before Royce would make up his mind. Then he'd get his signal from the locator. That was the way it looked to Malone, and he began to realize the power Zeb Crofitt wielded in Ashfork. He wheeled to face Crofitt, a savage anger rushing through him.

"You say I'm a fool for settling on Fox Butte," Jim grated. "You say you're trying to do me a favor by buying a relinquishment. I don't think you ever did a favor for anybody that didn't make you money. I think you've got some kind of a dirty trick up your sleeve, and I want to know what it is."

"That talk won't get you anywhere, Juniper," Royce growled. "You're new here. If you'd been here as long as I have, you'd know that Zeb Crofitt has done a lot for this country."

"He's advertised it," Malone admitted, turning back to the storekeeper, "and he's located us for one hundred dollars a crack. We've moved in, Royce, and we've made money for you. Now you come up with this hard luck yarn about how you can't afford to let me have this stuff on tick. It sure doesn't make sense unless you're into the same business Crofitt's in, or unless you're scared of him and take his orders." He looked at Crofitt, eyes filled with contempt. "I can't see why you'd be scared of him, Royce. I don't know why anybody would."

Crofitt took the tooth-battered cigar out of his mouth.

"I don't reckon anybody's scared of me, Juniper. Sure, I try to make money. I reckon we all do, but like I said, I'm trying to do you a favor. For one thing, I'd like to keep you from getting plugged by Bailey's gun-

slingers. Likewise, I'm against you selling posts to the settlers because Bailey won't like it. Whatever we do let's avoid bloodshed. You wouldn't have a chance with hardcases like Ace Ansell and Yaff Dulane."

Malone tapped a long finger thoughtfully on the counter. A new thought had come into his mind. Most of Matt Royce's trade had been with Orv Bailey. Over the years it had been Bailey's business that had kept Royce going. The settlers' trade was a new addition that might not be permanent. Bailey would be here a long time. Too, Zeb Crofitt might be Bailey's man. It was certainly possible that Crofitt wanted the settlers to fail, perhaps so he could locate a new bunch, or perhaps because Bailey had put pressure on him.

"I can't quite see through this," Jim said finally. "I'm not as slow in the head as some folks, and when I find out a little more about the way you operate, I'll know what to do. There's just one thing, Royce. I hope somebody comes in here and starts a new store. With Zeb Crofitt telling you what to do, I've got a hunch you wouldn't last long."

When Malone strode past Crofitt, he saw the expression of deep and man-killing hatred on the locator's narrow face. He knew now, if he hadn't before, that Crofitt would murder him when and if he had the chance.

As Malone stepped through the door, he heard a man's soft voice.

"Keep going. Don't look at me. Watch your step."

The briefest of side-glances showed him Slim Priddy, leaning against the door casing, a cigarette drooping idly from one corner of his mouth. His eyes playing lazily along the street, he was apparently a man with no serious intent or purpose.

As Malone went on to his wagon, he saw what Priddy meant. Two men had come through the batwings of the Union Bar and were heading directly for him. One, a red-faced, meaty-lipped man, was Ace Ansell. The other, medium tall with nervous, cat-quick movements, was Yaff Dulane. Both were Orv Bailey's men, and, like Slim Priddy, had the name of being tough hands, but Jim knew there was at least one difference. Slim Priddy had been with Bailey for years; Ansell and Dulane were new men, having come into the country during the winter after the wave of homesteaders had settled in Jericho valley.

JIM MALONE had untied his team and was in the seat when Ansell and Dulane came up.

"We hear you're working the settlers up against us, Juniper," Ansell said. "You aiming to live long or short?"

Jim's movement was swift and amazing. Both Ansell and Dulane blinked as they stared into the grim muzzle of Jim's gun.

"Gents," he said coldly, "you're standing a little nearer Hades than I am. Which do you make it, a quick trip, or do you care for a few more earthly pleasures?"

For a homesteader to draw a gun on two known hardcases was something like a jackrabbit standing in his tracks and slugging it out with a cougar. When Ace Ansell recovered from the shock of surprise, his tone had gone mild. "Now see here, Juniper, you've got us all wrong. We just aimed to talk things over with you. We didn't aim to get tough. Now mebbe you'd better put that hogleg up before it goes off. I never saw a nester who could hit a wall of his own house when he was inside, but you might have an accident."

"There'll be an accident all right," Malone said grimly, "right in your brisket if you make a wrong move. If you want to talk, get at it. I've got a ways to go tonight."

"I don't talk good with that thing poked in my face," Yaff Dulane growled. "Go on, put it up."

"If you don't want to talk . . ." Malone began.

"All right, all right," Dulane broke in. "Here it is. Slim Priddy saw you yesterday about pulling stakes, but you didn't listen. You're still here."

"A profound observation," Jim murmured. "I am for a fact."

"You weren't satisfied just to stay here," Dulane went on. "You had to proposition the rest of the clodbusters about buying posts you aim to cut. We don't aim to beat about the bush none. You deliver one of those posts and you're a dead man."

"That all?"

"It's enough, ain't it?" Ansell snarled.

"Why yes, it sounds like it would be. Just consider me a dead man. I reckon all the boys in the valley who buy posts will likewise be dead men."

"Mebbe not," Ansell said. "We'll get 'em out after we get you out. You seem to be the tough jigger. Between that and the fact that you've got all the juniper there is in this whole blamed country you can figger you'll be on the receiving end of the hot lead when we start slinging it."

"And if I know anything about grangers," Dulane added, "you don't need to expect no help from them. You may be tough, Juniper,

but you ain't tough enough to fight the Bar O."

Juniper Jim wanted to get a look at Slim Priddy, but he didn't dare take his eyes away from Ansell and Dulane. Somehow it didn't quite add up. Slim had given a warning, but he hadn't talked as if Orv Bailey planned to push things immediately. Malone didn't know Bailey well. From what he'd heard the cowman was stubborn and a fighter, but he was also a fair-minded man. Now Ansell and Dulane showed up with tough talk, and the promise of immediate death if he delivered a single post.

"I've got no ambition to fight the Bar O," Jim said mildly. "I've seen enough fighting to last me a lifetime. All I want is to be let alone."

"It might be," Ansell suggested in a low tone, "that if you'd sell a relinquishment, you'd be let alone."

The gunmen had been talking loudly, loud enough for Slim Priddy to hear, but now Ansell's words were so low they barely reached Malone. The feeling grew in the nester that something wasn't right, so he probed for more information.

"You willing to buy, Ansell?" Malone snapped the question at him.

"Sure, I'll buy," the gunman said with quick eagerness. "What's your price?"

"I hadn't thought about it. Would you give a thousand dollars?"

"A little steep." Ansell looked at Dulane, and then brought his eyes back to Malone. "Yeah, I'll pay that."

"Isn't this funny business for a gunslinger who's drawing fighting wages from Orv Bailey?" Malone queried.

"There's no law against it," Ansell snarled.

"Maybe Bailey would pay more than that?" Malone shook his head. "That's funny business, too, for a man like Bailey. "

"Are we dealing or ain't we?" Ansell demanded.

"No," Juniper Jim said quickly, "but I might deal with your boss. Tell Bailey I want to see him."

Ansell looked like a small boy who had a bag of candy within reach, and then had had it swept away from him. His red face grew redder with the quick wave of anger that washed over him.

"I won't tell Bailey nothing," he snarled. "Before we're done you won't be so smart and you won't be half so tough!"

Ace Ansell swung on his heel, and strode back across the street. Yaff Dulane waited a moment, sultry eyes on Malone as if trying to make up his mind whether the man could be broken. Then, he, too, wheeled away and followed Ansell.

Jim Malone had his look at Slim Priddy then. The Bar O buckaroo had not moved from the door. The cigarette still dangled from his lip. He grinned at Malone, and the nester grinned back.

The notion was in his mind that Ansell and Dulane were talking for themselves and not Orv Bailey.

As he drove out of town he thought about it, but by the time he reached home he had come to no conclusion. He knew men like Ansell and Dulane. They were the kind who earned fighting wages by carrying out orders and slamming lead at whoever got in the way of their boss, but this thing of paying one thousand dollars for a relinquishment of nothing more than a butte top covered with junipers wasn't in line. Men of Ansell's and Dulane's caliber usually never got a thousand dollars together in a lifetime.

CHAPTER III

Fire in the Night

THE following week Jim had little time to worry about Orv Bailey or his gunmen. He'd scoured the valley, and succeeded in borrowing the tools that he needed.

He was up at dawn every morning that week, worked until dark, and fell into bed after a hasty meal, sore of muscle and utterly tired. Every night before he went to sleep he thought of Ann, and there was a great satisfaction in him when he told himself that a few weeks of post cutting would bring in enough money for him to send for Ann before the summer was over.

Then the satisfaction would go out of him when he remembered the trouble he faced. He could not send for Ann until it was settled, finally and completely.

There was no indication that any of Bailey's men were watching Malone that week. He had not expected trouble until he delivered his first load of posts. He drove back from that first delivery, the Winchester within easy reach, eyes raking the sagebrush for a drygulcher, but he reached his shack and unhitched without trouble.

Then, as he left the barn, he saw something that both surprised and puzzled him. A sur-

vey gang was working on the south rim of Dry Canyon.

An army of buckaroos coming at him with lead-belching guns would not have surprised Jim Malone but a survey gang peacefully working on the rim of Dry Canyon was something else.

He went back into the barn, saddled a horse, and rode toward the canyon. By the time he had reached the rim the men were gone. Their camp, he guessed, would not be far away, and he put his horse down the south wall, following the grade stakes to the canyon floor. An hour later he rounded a turn, and found himself in the camp.

"I want to see the boss," Malone told the first man he saw.

The man jerked a thumb at a graybeard who was hunkered by the fire studying a sheaf of papers.

"Clint," he called, "this gent wants to see you."

The graybeard rose and came toward Malone.

"What can I do for you?" he asked.

"You can satisfy my curiosity," Malone answered. "When I got home tonight, I saw some of your boys on the south rim of Dry Canyon. Before I got there they'd left. What's up?"

"You the gent who filed on Fox Butte?"

"Yes."

"A railroad's coming into Ashfork," the graybeard said. "Not just yet, but construction will start by the time you get proved up. Right now we're trying to figure out the best way to get up on the plateau. Dry Canyon gives us an easy grade into this country, but we've got to leave the canyon floor along about where you saw the boys. There must have been quite a river through here at one time, and it had a big falls not far above here because we ran smack into a two hundred foot cliff."

A good many things were clear as Malone rode home. It wasn't the juniper on Fox Butte that Orv Bailey wanted. It was an opportunity to sell a right-of-way to the railroad, an opportunity that meant a fortune. That explained why Ace Ansell and Yaff Dulane had pressed Juniper Jim a week ago in Ashfork, and why Ansell had offered one thousand dollars for a relinquishment. Too, it explained Zeb Crofitt's actions. Malone was still thinking about it when he reached the south rim, and saw the fires below his house.

For a moment he sat his saddle, stunned by what he saw. It was dark now, dark enough so that the row of fires looked like a line of stars along the shoulder of Fox Butte. He knew, without going any farther, that they'd burned his piles of posts.

A week's work, except for the one load he'd delivered, was going up in smoke. Ansell and Dulane hadn't been fooling. They said he'd be a dead man if he delivered a single post. Likely they were hiding up in the junipers where he'd been cutting, ready to pour lead into him the minute he showed up.

A grim stubbornness came into Jim Malone then. He'd go back to his shack, fill his pockets with all the shells he had, and swing down along the south shoulder of the butte so he'd come in below them. He rode slowly, confident that his enemies would wait patiently for him, making a wide circle on the chance that if he had been seen leaving his place earlier in the evening Bailey's crew might have set a trap for him between the house and Dry Canyon.

He left his horse fifty yards from the cabin, and keeping in the junipers along the edge of the clearing he'd made that winter, wormed his way toward the shack. It was possible, but hardly probable that men like Ansell and Dulane would set a trap for him in his house and barn. They'd expect him to hightail for the fire, which was exactly the thing he meant not to do.

CAREFULLY Jim Malone worked his way around his woodpile and on to the corner of the shack. There he stopped as a match flame burst into life. He heard a man's low voice.

"Where in heck would Juniper be, Slim? I'm not going to sit here all night waiting for him."

"Chances are he's seen the fires, and he's trying to root somebody out around there, figuring they've set a trap for him."

It was Orv Bailey and Slim Priddy, hunkering on the ground in front of the shack without the least effort at concealment, their horses ground-hitched a few yards away. Malone didn't move. Whatever purpose had brought them here, it was not to kill him, and obviously they did not expect him to make trouble.

"Wonder who burned them posts?" Bailey asked.

"Hard to tell," Slim answered. "Crofitt mebbe. He sure didn't want Jim settling on Fox Butte, which same I can't understand unless he's rustling our beef and figured Jim might see something from up here."

"It ain't that," Bailey said. "We haven't lost enough to get excited about."

Malone stepped into view, the hammer of his gun back.

"I don't know what this is about," he said, "but I'd like to know." Bailey dropped his cigarette stub, and toed it out.

"It's time you're getting here. We were about ready to ride."

"Somebody burned my posts tonight," Malone said. "It might have been by your orders, Bailey, figuring that I was so near starved out I'd be willing to quit. If it was, you might be interested to know I'm not quitting. If anybody's going to sell a right-of-way to the railroad, I figure it'll be me."

"What's the crazy galoot talking about?" Bailey asked Slim.

"I'm cussed if I know," Slim answered. "Mebbe you better talk sense, Jim."

Orv Bailey was either a good actor, or else he didn't know about the railroad coming up Dry Canyon. In the darkness Bailey's and Slim's faces were dark ovals in a darker night.

"Look, Malone," Bailey said. "Slim told me you said in town last week that you wanted to see me. It ain't my habit to go calling on homesteaders, but since you're kind of a key man in these parts, I thought I would just to see what was in your head. I didn't give orders to have your posts burned, and I don't know anything about any railroad. What's more, Ansell and Dulane were acting on their own when they tried getting tough with you in town the other day."

Malone didn't believe Bailey, but he didn't say so.

"Let's go in," he said.

He lighted a lamp, and set it on the table.

"Bailey," he demanded, "are you telling me you didn't know anything about a railroad coming up Dry Canyon?"

"I sure don't," Bailey said doggedly. "I've been trying to get a railroad in here for years, but I'd about given it up."

There was a sort of plaintive appeal in Orv Bailey's face that kept Jim from calling him a liar. Slim Priddy had come in, but Bailey was standing in the open doorway, the lamplight washing into the night around him.

"It sure is," Jim said. "I saw a survey outfit on the south rim when I got home. I went down into the canyon to where their camp was, and talked to the boss. He said they had to come out of the canyon about where I saw the outfit. That makes my place worth a pile of money, Bailey, when I get my patent. It makes sense now why Ace Ansell said he'd give me a thousand dollars for a relinquishment. I figured he was talking for you."

"I didn't hear him say that," Slim said, "and I was sure bending my ears your way."

"Ansell wasn't talking for me." Bailey shouted. "I . . ."

Orv Bailey never finished his sentence. From the fringe of junipers below the house a Winchester cracked, the flash a vivid flame in the night. Bailey lurched with the impact of the slug, and sprawled his length on the floor.

JIM MALONE reached the table in one long stride, blew out the lamp and hit the floor just as a second Winchester from the barn slammed a shot into the shack before the echo of the first had died.

"The dirty sons that burned my posts," Malone said. "Have a look at Bailey, Slim. I'm going after them. Keep up a fire from the door and window so they'll think both of us are in here."

He crawled through the door and around the shack, rifle bullets shrieking overhead like persistent, life-seeking hornets. He moved away from the shack, into the clearing, and on toward the barn. Then he stopped, noting carefully the position of the man in the barn. He was probably, Malone thought, standing just inside the door, but the night was too dark to make out the man's figure.

The men below the house had stopped firing. They were likely Ace Ansell and Yaff Dulane, Malone guessed, but why, if they were working for Orv Bailey, would they do the job they had done tonight?

He was convinced now that Bailey had no part in the effort to buy his relinquishment, nor in Ansell's and Dulane's threats. Why, then, were Ansell and Dulane carrying out their threats? For that question Jim could think of only one answer. They must have found out about the railroad coming up Dry Canyon, and they were working their own thieving, murderous game.

Slim Priddy was answering the fire from the shack window. With it distracting the man in the barn, Malone's movements against a black earth would likely go unseen. Then he remembered Orv Bailey, and knew he could wait no longer. The cattleman had gone down like a man either hit hard or dead. If he were wounded, there would be but little time to get him to the medico in Ashfork.

Malone waited until the man in the barn started shooting again. Then he began firing, laying his shots a foot apart and waist high. When his Colt was empty, he rolled away, reloaded, and waited.

There was no sound. Still thinking of

Bailey, Malone ran toward the barn, stumbled over a body in the doorway and fell inside. He pulled the body away from the door just as Slim opened up again, his bullets screaming through the doorway or thudding into the wall.

When Slim stopped, Malone lighted a match, and cupping it with a hand, held it to the man's face. It was Yaff Dulane, stone dead.

"We got Dulane," Malone called. "Hold your fire. Ansell's probably down in the junipers. We'll root him out."

"You bet we'll root him out," Slim yelled. "The dirty son got Orv purty hard."

Again Malone waited, wondering if Ansell had come toward the barn, or whether he was waiting in the junipers. He didn't wait long, for a few second after Slim had yelled he heard the pound of a horse's hoofs below the house. Ace Ansell would be on his way to town, and there, Malone thought grimly, he'd finish the job unless Ansell lost his nerve and kept on going.

"He's pulled his freight, Slim," Malone shouted. "I'll harness up, and we'll get Bailey into town."

Bailey had been hit high in the chest, a dangerous wound, but not necessarily a fatal one. Slim bandaged the bullet hole while Juniper Jim harnessed his team. They laid Bailey in the wagon bed, and covered him with a blanket, for the night chill had set in.

"It don't make sense," Slim muttered bitterly, "why that polecat would want to drill Orv unless mebbe he thought it was you. You and Orv are about the same build. Mebbe he let go before he knew who was standing in the doorway. I knew him and Dulane was no good, and I told Orv that."

"How did Bailey happen to hire them?" Malone asked.

Priddy swore wrathfully.

"Matt Royce talked him into it. He claimed we'd have trouble with the grangers, and Orv had better be prepared with some gunslingers. It was Royce that sent for 'em. All winter Royce has been trying to egg Orv into getting tough. I don't reckon he'd have sent me out the other day if Royce hadn't kept prodding him. Orv never was one to make trouble."

"I'll drive and you better ride back in the box with Bailey," Slim said. "We don't want him bouncin' around and losin' claret."

"Take it easy," Malone instructed, climbing the wheel spokes to reach his patient. "And keep a gun handy all the way to town."

"Hand me Bailey's six-gun," Slim said from the seat. "It's quicker to get than a rifle."

CHAPTER IV

The Pay Was in Lead

IT WAS midnight when they pulled up in front of the medico's office. The only lights along Main Street were in the windows of Royce's Mercantile, and the Union Bar. Slim pounded on the door until the doctor opened it, a lamp held in his hand. He was wearing a white nightshirt, and rubbing his eyes.

"What's wrong, Slim?"

"Orv's shot, Doc. He's got a slug in his brisket, and he's lost a lot of blood."

"Orv Bailey?" The medico swung around and put down his lamp, all desire for sleep going out of him. "How'd he get into a gun ruckus?"

"He was 'bushed," Slim said wrathfully, "by Ace Ansell."

They carried Bailey into the doctor's office, and laid him on a bed in a back room.

"Not so bad," the medico said, after he'd had his look, "but he won't be on his pins for awhile. Ansell shot him, eh? I thought Ansell was working for him?"

"So did Orv," Priddy said, and began to swear. "There's something going on I ain't figgered out. We got Dulane, but Ansell got away."

"Gunslingers like that never do a country any good," the medico said.

Malone went back into the office. He sat smoking, thinking back over the things that had happened since he'd settled on Fox Butte. Zeb Crofitt had said he'd have trouble with Bailey. More than once when he'd bought supplies in Royce's store he'd heard Royce say that Bailey wouldn't let him stay through his first year. If anybody in the country would know about a railroad coming in, it would be Crofitt, and knowing the country, he could have guessed that the railroad would come in through Dry Canyon, and that it would leave the canyon at Juniper Jim's place.

It began to fit, and Malone knew he should have seen it sooner. He would have if Crofitt and Royce hadn't successfully built a smoke screen around Orv Bailey. Crofitt had wanted to keep Fox Butte open until he was sure what route the railroad would take, and then likely he or Royce would have filed on it.

Malone stepped to the door, and flipped his cigarette stub into the street. He stood there wondering about Ace Ansell, and noting that now the only light along the street was in the window of the Union Bar. He was guessing that Ansell had hidden in the store, and he decided that it was as good a time as any to wind this up. He stepped back into the office, checked his gun, and returned it to its holster. It was then he heard steps on the boardwalk. He wheeled toward the door, hand on gun butt as the big figure of Matt Royce filled the doorway.

"I saw your team out there," Royce said smoothly, "and got to wondering what had happened."

"I brought Orv Bailey in," Malone said, watching the man's face. "He got plugged in the back. At my place."

"Orv? Why, that's too bad. Hurt bad?"

"Bad enough," Jim snapped. He thought of saying that Ace Ansell did it, and probably by either Royce's or Crofitt's orders, but he didn't. Royce wouldn't have come here if he hadn't a scheme in mind, and the chances were good that Royce's or perhaps Crofitt's scheming would do the very thing Malone wanted . . . bring Ansell into the open.

"I'm sorry," Royce said. "You know, Jim, I'm plumb regretful about not letting you have them tools last week. I knew I'd made a mistake as soon as you left. You come on down to the store. Now that you've got your wagon in town, you might as well take 'em home."

It was a trap. The smell was too strong. Ansell had told Royce and Crofitt what had happened, and they aimed to finish the job that had been started on Fox Butte. Finish it with hot lead for Jim Malone. Still, knowing that it was a trap, he nodded agreeably.

"That's right nice of you, Matt. Sure, I'll go along."

HE SHOULD have told Slim where he was going. Three to one odds were too big for any man to buck, but it was up to him to buck exactly that. He didn't want Royce to know he was suspicious, and if he called to Slim Priddy, the storekeeper would know, so he stepped through the doorway with Royce. It might be a gun trap along the street with Ace Ansell hiding in the darkness of an alleyhead, but Jim didn't think so. Not with Royce along. The chances were too good that Ansell might get the wrong man in the blackness that lay along the street.

"It sure is too bad about Orv," Royce was saying as they moved up the walk toward his store. "He's a big man in this country. If he dies there's no one to replace him."

"But you kept saying all winter that I'd have trouble with him before the year was out," Malone prodded.

"And you did," Royce said quickly.

The trouble wasn't with Orv Bailey, the nester thought, but he let it go. He went into the store with Royce, and followed him through the darkness along the counter,

"I've got the stuff you picked out laid away back here," Royce said. "I dunno why I didn't let you take it the other day, but I guess it was because I don't do much credit business, and I didn't have time to think it over."

Matt Royce was lying as fast as he could talk, but Malone let him think he was putting it over. The storekeeper opened the door into the back room, struck a match, and lighted a lamp.

"Here it is, Jim," he called over his shoulder. "Want me to help you pack it out to your wagon, or can you make out? I was just walking home from the Union Bar when I saw you in the doc's office, and I thought you might just as well take these things as long as you were in town."

Malone had not gone into the room. He stood in the doorway, gun in hand, and his words cut across the room with the sting of a whiplash.

"Royce, you're a liar and a killer. Inside the room along the wall you've got Crofitt and Ansell, all set to burn me down when I come in, and then maybe you'd try to pin Bailey's shooting on to me. Ansell might come up with a lie about seeing me do it."

There was silence then, the tight silence that ribbons on and on, and seems to have no end, seconds that pull out into what seems hours. Royce stood with his back to Malone, not moving, still facing the table where the lamp stood.

"What are you going to call it, Royce?" Jim asked, and pronged back the hammer of his gun. "You're playing for big money you'll never get. In case you didn't know, you'd be interested in hearing that the railroad survey crew is already up to my place in Dry Canyon. I figure you and Crofitt told Ansell and Dulane to burn my posts so it would look like Bailey ordered it. Then they were supposed to gun me down so I'd be out of the way, and still the blame would be on Bailey. It didn't work, Royce."

Still Royce made no move, and again the silence was upon them, silence that pulled men's nerves to the breaking point and past.

Then Royce made his play, whipping a gun from a shelf below the table top, wheeling, and squeezing trigger. Malone let him go that far, and as he fired knew he'd made a mistake, for it was then Ace Ansell came into view, his Colt spewing lead. Royce spun away from the table, a chunk of lead in his heart, and sprawled over a sack of grain.

ANSELL had that advantage of time, enough to drive a slug into Malone that sliced along his ribs, ripped open a bloody gash, and went on to bury itself in the wall, but Ace Ansell had hurried his shot. He never had another chance, for Malone had laced a bullet into his chest.

He began to wilt, gun dribbling from nerveless fingers, went down on hands and knees, held himself there an instant as he groped in sudden blindness for the gun he'd dropped, and then fell and lay motionless.

Jim Malone stayed in the doorway, eyes stabbing the shadows for Zeb Crofitt. The locator should be in on the play, but he wasn't. Malone didn't see him until he'd stepped into the room. Crofitt was lying in the corner. Jim thought his hands and feet were tied, or he had been knocked cold, but when he knelt beside the locator, he saw that Crofitt was dead. His skull had been smashed by a hammer.

"You fool!" Slim Priddy shouted as he dashed in from the store. "You crazy, lame-brained fool, what'd you tackle this job by yourself for?" Then his eyes swept the room, and slowly came back to Malone, admiration breaking across his face. "Fella, you sure did a job."

"I had all the powder-burning I wanted," Malone said as he got to his feet, "when I was riding for an outfit in Idaho, but guess trouble just sort of rolls my way. Maybe we'd better go get the marshal and tell him what happened."

Later, when the story had been told, and the medico had patched Jim's side, Slim Priddy stood beside the mahogany in the Union Bar, and poured the drinks. He said regretfully:

"Looks like we'll never know the whole yarn, but I don't reckon we've missed much. I figger it was Royce kicking all this up trying to make it look like Orv was doing it.

"You know the real reason Orv came out to see you tonight was to find out all that Ansell and Dulane said. He'd kept worrying it around in his head all week after I told him what I'd heard in town. He couldn't figger out why they was so proddy. He hadn't said nothing to 'em about pouring it on.

"I don't reckon he'll make any trouble now for the grangers. He's got enough range, and there's times when he needs to buy hay and grain. Might work all right for everybody. Orv's a purty good hombre."

"One thing we'll never know," Malone said thoughtfully, "is whether Crofitt or Royce was behind the trouble."

"I still say Royce," Slim said. "He was the one who brought Ansell and Dulane in. Don't forget that. Likewise he was the one that sucked you into what he thought would be a trap with Ansell waiting to plug you. Probably he found out through Crofitt about the railroad. For years Royce has belly-ached about barely making a living when other gents, meaning Orv, was rolling in dinero."

"Anyhow, Crofitt got his. They must have had an argument about who got the gravy, or else Royce and Ansell wanted all of it."

Slim fingered his drink, a far-away look in his eyes.

"You know, Jim, Orv had a girl once. That was before he built the Bar O into a big outfit. He kept waiting to make a lot of money, and she up and let another galoot put a loop on her. I told Orv about your view and the ozone, and about your girl. It kind o' got him. He was aiming to tell you he'd buy all the posts you didn't sell the grangers, and he'd buy wood from you. He says if you send for that girl right quick, he'd even see you got a real good bull for a wedding present. He says you've got to run a few head of stock just to keep from being a common old granger. He'll see to it you and your new wife won't starve."

"Then I reckon me and Orv will get along," Malone said. He thought about Ann, about her pug nose and her blue eyes and her yellow hair. He thought about the way she'd kissed him that last time and how she'd said it would be a long year.

"Orv says that all newcomers in a country have to be kind o' tried by a jury of what happens before they're a part of the country. Looks to me like you've had your trial tonight. From now on you'll be a part of the country just like Fox Butte."

"Then I'll be writing Ann a letter," Juniper Jim said, "and getting her out here pronto. Yes, sir, Slim, we're going to raise wheat and a crop of kids. Maybe I won't will them a lot of money when I cash in, but I'm sure of one thing. I'm going to start them on top of Fox Butte where they can see a little ways past the end of their pug noses."

"I didn't like your mug before," the deputy said. "I hate it now."

HE-MAN DEPUTY

By JOE PAYNE

When a guitar-playing crooner came along and made eyes at his gal, Deputy Hunk Sanders just itched for some action!

MY YOUNG deputy, Hunk Sanders, stomped back to the office with his wide mouth turned down. He planted his bow-legged chunk of body in front of my desk and held out a pasteboard container.

"That," he growled, "was the commotion! The barber's button poured some of it down a customer's collar. I planted a boot in the kid's britches and confiscated the itchin' powder."

I pocketed the container, grinning.

"We'll hold it for evidence," I said.

Hunk's blue eyes glowered into Guldoro's main drag.

"A heck of a place," he opined. "Four months as your deputy and all that time the town quieter than King Tut's tomb."

I eyed him close.

"Why don't you quit grumpin' and pop the question to Grace Loveland?"

Hunk's face got red.

"Grace is not going to marry no two-bit deputy with exactly twenty frogskins in the bank!"

"Maybe Grace don't want no hero or rich plutocrat," I pointed out.

Hunk turned, slow, and looked me square in the eye.

"Listen," he said, a kind of huskiness in his tone. "My pa was a forty-and-fodder cowhand all his life. When he died ma and

us kids were livin' in a two-room shack. Ma worked herself to death takin' in washing to support us." He drew a slow breath. "I'm not lettin' Grace in for anything like that. Before I ask her to marry me, I've got to prove to myself I can amount to somethin'!"

I couldn't find any answer to that so I pulled the morning paper off the desk.

"You must have gandered at this already," I told him.

The front page article stated that the safe over at the Sage City bank had been mysteriously cracked the night before and ten thousand dollars stole. A reward of five hundred dollars had been offered for the apprehension of the thief or thieves.

"I saw it," Hunk admitted. "That's the second bank safe that's been robbed lately. A week ago it was the one at Elk River. I'm keepin' my eyes open."

"No need suspectin' every stranger you see," I admonished. "You been actin' like Sherlock Holmes all mornin'."

Hunk didn't answer. He was staring at a passing rider on a big bay horse. He stepped out the door and moved down the street. I followed.

The rider turned off at Willow street into the alley back of the bank and opera house. Hunk was stompin' after him, watching him so close he didn't see Grace Loveland ridin' her sorrel gelding into town.

I met Grace at the corner. She reined in, her brown eyes shooting daggers after Hunk.

"What's eating him?" she demanded. "He passed me up like a lop-eared sheep."

"He's hastenin' to investigate an evil-looking character so he can be a hero maybe, or get a reward, so he can—"

"Ask me to marry him," Grace snapped. "You told me that one before. Why didn't that bow-legged lummox stay punching cows where he belongs?"

"Let us proceed to the alley," I suggested, uncomfortable.

Suddenly she blinked hard and her red lips trembled.

"I love him," she wailed. "I'd marry him today, if we had to live in a one-room nester's cabin. But I can't even get him to ask me!"

Eyes stormy, she turned her gelding to follow me.

The stranger, a salty-looking redhead had stopped at the hoss-trough behind the bank. Hunk halted beside him as we reached the alley.

"Ridin' through?" Hunk asked, cold. "Or stoppin'?"

The redhead glanced down from his saddle.

"Yeah."

"What's your business here?" Hunk snapped.

"Waterin' my hoss."

"I didn't like your mug when you passed the office," my deputy stated. "I hate it now. Ride on."

"This, I take it, is public property," the stranger sneered. "However, I'll ride on, since that is what I aimed to do in the first place."

So sayin', he galloped off.

HUNK stomped back to where we was watching, his face red.

"Howdy, Grace," he said.

Ignoring him, she leaned down and grabbed the newspaper I was still holding.

"Oh, look!" she hollered. "A picture of Rudy Manfredo!"

She read the caption out loud:

"Rudy Manfredo, sensational singing guitarist, gave a program at the Sage City Opera House last night. As usual, the handsome young artist was well-nigh mobbed by feminine admirrers. His manager, Signor Alberti, proved a suave master of ceremonies."

It went on to say that the audience was held spellbound, etc., etc., and ended by statin' that Rudy's next appearance would be at Guldoro Friday night.

Grace sighed and raised her eyes, ecstatic-like.

"What a package of male beauty," she breathed. "I can hardly wait 'till tonight."

"Ladyfingers!" Hunk grumbled. "Any man that'd spend his time lollygaggin' around like that wears lace on his shirt-tail."

"That's not what half the women in the country are saying," Grace retorted, cool. "You might get some pointers tonight."

"Bah!"

I grinned. Grace was layin' it on thick for Hunk's benefit. She was takin' a different tack in egging him on.

"Speakin' of the devil, or angel, as the case may be," I put in. "What's that gaudy lookin' wagon pulling into town?"

"It's Rudy!" Grace squealed. "I can see the sign on the side!"

She swung the sorrel toward the Guldoro Hotel where the wagon, pulled by two white hosses, was stopping. Hunk and me followed.

Two men were gettin' off the wagon seat. One was a short, dark hombre. The other one, tall and slim and blond, started bowin' and wavin' at the gals and the small fry flockin' around. He kissed his hand, admiring-like, at Grace as she controlled the

antics of her sorrel.

Grace favored him with a smile like the sun bustin' up over the desert and Hunk cussed under his breath.

"I don't like the looks of them hombres," he muttered. "I got a hunch they've been doin' the bank robbin' lately."

I snorted.

"The green-eyed monster has throwed you for certain," I told him.

Barlow, the editor of the Sentinal, scuttled up, carryin' his photograph outfit.

"How about a picture, Rudy?" he chortled. "Something snappy for the paper."

Rudy bowed, graceful.

"Delighted."

"Just a minute," the dark hombre grinned. "Let's put some local color in it." He pointed at Grace. "Young lady, could I prevail on you to pose with Rudy?"

"Easy," Grace answered prompt.

She swung off her mount and joined them. The guitar player put an arm around her and grinned while Barlow stuck his head under his camera cloth.

"Hold on!" Hunk said, his face like a thundercloud. "You hombres got a license to operate here?"

"Certainly," the dark one answered, frowning. "The marshal knows about it."

Hunk glared at me.

"Anyhow, we can do it without this picture tomfoolery!" he said.

Rudy looked at him, then he looked at Grace.

"Aha!" he said. "Well, my belligerent friend, unless you can think up some law to stop us, we'll let the young lady decide."

Grace gave him an adoring look.

"Go on, Mr. Barlow," she said.

They snapped the picture while Hunk fumed, then Rudy kissed Grace's hand and beat it into the hotel like he was afraid of bein' mobbed. Grace climbed her saddle and rode off, givin' Hunk another good ignoring.

"Milksop!" Hunk growled, lookin' like he aimed to stomp after Rudy. "I'm a mind to knock him down and gallop his works out!"

IT looked like all Guldoro was in the Opera House at eight o'clock. I took my stand at the back where I could watch the crowd and stop any trouble before it got started. I could see Grace settin' near the front and Hunk settin' two or three seats back of her.

Hunk was glowerin' like he was afraid somebody might see him there, but he needn't have worried, since all the so-called he-men were there, likewise. Grace was eyein' the stage, breathless, and now and then sneakin' a glance at Hunk.

The dark hombre came onto the stage wearin' a black monkey-suit they called a tuxedo. He skinned his teeth at the crowd and held up his hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he orated. "I am Signor Alberti, manager of tonight's artist. I am happy to see such a fine crowd this evening. Now, without further ado, I give you the one you have all been waiting for: Rudy Manfredo!"

Rudy oozed onto the stage, luggin' a guitar. He had on a black Mexican-looking outfit with gold trimmin's and a sombrero that hung at the back of his neck. He looked slim and elegant and when he bowed, his hair shone like a new-minted penny. A long sigh swept through the Opera House like wind through pine tree tops.

Rudy squatted on a chair, the guitar across his knees. He raked off a couple of chords and started to moan like a maverick caught in a wire fence. The moan wound up statin' that all that mattered in this vale of tears was love.

Squeals and howls came from the audience. The young females started a rush toward the stage. Grace led all the others.

They swamped Rudy Manfredo, tearin' buttons and braid off his outfit, mussin' his hair, and some even trying to plant kisses on his face.

Signor Alberti tore out on the stage, his hands raised toward heaven.

"Ladies!" he hollered. "Ladies!"

He finally got them off the stage. I could see Hunk glaring at Grace. Lots of other fellows in the crowd was doin' the same to their female companions. I didn't blame Hunk much. It was plumb disgustin'.

Rudy put his shirt-tail in and smoothed his hair down. He smiled toward Grace, then faced the crowd, actin' mad.

"What's the matter with Guldoro?" he asked, sarcastic. "Aren't there any he-men here?"

A growl swept the room. Three or four cowpokes jumped up, but Hunk beat them all to the stage.

My deputy shook a fist under Rudy Manfredo's snoot.

"Listen, Fauntleroy!" he snarled. "There's lots of men around here can handle you! I can whip you any way you name!"

Rudy eyed him, contemptuous.

"If it isn't the belligerent law-man! You sure you're not takin' advantage of this?" He tapped Hunk's badge.

My deputy tore off his badge.

"If you was wearin' a smoke-pole, you'd eat your words!" he bellowed.

"Gentlemen!" Signor Alberti put in. "This is a musical program!"

He put out his hand, dramatic, toward the audience, then placed his paw on Hunk's shoulder.

"Are you challenging Rudy to a fight?" he asked, impressive. "A western duel?"

"One of these days you're gonna reach out an arm and draw back a stub," Hunk growled, throwin' off the paw. "Take what I said for what it's worth."

The Signor glanced at Rudy who was twiddlin' his guitar strings, careless-like.

"Rudy, you have insulted the gentleman," he said. "You must give him satisfaction. Since this started in public I suggest that it be finished in public."

"Suits me," Hunk said.

"As the challenged party, I have the choice of weapons," Rudy put in.

"Name it," Hunk snapped. "Guns or knives—or wheelbarrows at forty paces!"

"Wait!" the dark hombre said.

He scuttled into the wings and came back with two pairs of boxing gloves and shoes and two pairs of little panty britches. He had a metal gong too.

"Ten rounds to a decision," he announced. "Marquis of Queensbury rules."

Hunk stared at the gloves and britches. He'd never had a pair of either on in his life. I was gettin' uneasy. It was too cut and dried. It looked like Hunk had stuck his neck out. Likely the blond love moaner was plenty handy with his lunch-hooks. Him and his manager had worked this up deliberate as part of the act. But it was too late for Hunk to back out now, even if he wanted to. He'd done the challenging.

GRACE looked tickled to have them fighting over her. She didn't care a blast whether Hunk got whipped or not. She'd made him declare himself, in a way.

"I won't wear no panties," Hunk growled.

"You can't fight like street brawlers," Alberti said. He raised his voice. "We'll need a referee, a home-town referee. I won't be accused of bias. We'll need a time-keeper, too." He held up the gong. "Three minute rounds."

I stepped to the stage fast. Hunk would need what help I could give him. There was a T-in-a-Box cowpoke right behind me.

"I'll referee," I announced.

"And I'll keep time," the cowpoke said, pulling a turnip out of his pocket.

Alberti handed me the gloves and britches. He handed the gong to the T-in-a-box puncher.

"I'll retire to the wings and let you run the fight. When it's over we'll continue the concert."

I had a sudden idee. That itchin' powder was still in my pocket!

"Shake hands." I ordered.

Hunk hesitated, muttering, but he finally grabbed the paw Rudy stuck out. I grinned to myself. Nobody had seen me palm the itchin' powder. With my hand inside the pair of green panties, I rubbed them liberal with the powder while pretendin' to inspect them and the gloves.

"All right," I said, handing Rudy the powdered britches and Hunk the others. "Go dress."

The excitement was growing. Men were crowdin' toward the front and betting money was bein' passed around. The women were sitting tight. Grace was laughing and shaking hands with herself.

I grinned, too. When that itchin' powder hit Rudy, he wouldn't look so elegant. My own caloused palm was beginnin' to itch and burn like fire. It was a dirty trick, but Rudy and Alberti had tricked Hunk into makin' a sap of himself. They had it comin'.

Hunk and Rudy appeared, escorted by Alberti. The Signor waved them onto the stage, bowing, then disappeared again in the wings.

I sucked in my breath. Rudy had on the purple britches and Hunk had the green ones with the powder in 'em! The purple ones fitted Rudy better, apparently, and he must've been used to wearing 'em.

I laced on their gloves, my brain goin' like mad. Hunk was all right yet. The powder hadn't hit him.

"I'll call this thing off," I whispered to him, urgent.

Hunk flexed his muscles, grim-like, eyein' the slim-built Rudy who was posin' at the crowd.

"Like heck!"

"What's the matter? Your man wanting to back out?" Rudy cracked.

Hunk glared. I motioned to the cowpoke with the turnip.

"Play ball," I ordered, weak.

The cowpoke hit the gong and Hunk rushed, confident. He was two inches shorter than the blond moaner but broader and solider. He swung a haymaker but Rudy danced away and shot out a glove against his snoot.

Hunk growled and began to lash out hard in all directions. He only flailed the air. He

was too slow and his footwork was awful.

Mr. Rudy Manfredo danced in and out and around Hunk, grinning contempuous, his long legs as graceful as an antelope's. His hair wasn't even mussed. He wasn't hittin' Hunk hard, just cuttin' him up a little. I saw he figured on carryin' Hunk along for several rounds while he showed off.

The crowd was yelling hard, the men for Hunk and lots of the women for Rudy.

All of a sudden, as I butted between the battlers, tryin' to save Hunk punishment, my deputy let out a bellow like a wounded buffalo. He jumped four feet in the air and come down with his legs churnin'. He circled Rudy a mile a minute, starin' wildlike.

The surprised guitar-twiddler managed to catch him a belt on the whiskers, then Hunk was on him. My deputy was a terror now—a whirlwind of feet and gloves and elbows that blew from all directions. His footwork was somethin' to behold. He swung three or four haymakers at once and the last one caught Rudy flush on the chops.

The guitar player hurtled backward. He lit on the floor, rolled clean over and lay there, toes up. The crowd let out a roar and I rushed at Hunk, but my deputy wasn't waitin' for his arm to be raised in victory. He tore into the wings like a turpentined cat.

I HIGHTAILED after him. Hunk wasn't in the wings but the stage door was standin' open. I plunged into the alley.

I knew where Hunk was headin'. If I'd of been in his panties I'd of been hot-footin' for that horse-trough behind the bank, too!

A sudden gunshot blasted. I stopped short. Another slug buzzed past my ear.

Plungin' out of the shadows cast by the thin moon, a horseman was tryin' to ride me down. I jumped aside, cussin', and grabbed my smoke-pole out of its holster.

I fired just as the rider did. His slug fluttered my sleeves but I emptied the saddle above me. The hoss went plunging on.

I ran on, lookin' for Hunk. Then I heard splashin' at the hoss-trough. Hunk was settin' in the trough up to his chest in water. He had Signor Alberti in a bear-hug.

The Signor was threshin' and cussin' but it wasn't doin' him any good. As I arrived, Hunk got him turned the way he wanted him. He shot out his fist a couple of times and Alberti was quiet. My deputy dumped the Signor out onto the ground.

"There you are!" he panted. "I caught him beatin' it out the back door of the bank with a satchel. The satchel's right by your feet. You'll likely find it full of greenbacks."

"Jumpin' bulfrogs!" I said, snatchin' up the satchel and opening it. "You're right."

People were pourin' out through the stage door. Hunk made as if he'd jump and run, then settled back in the water, growling.

I hurried to where the hombre I'd downed was layin'. It was the salty-lookin' red-head who'd rode the bay hoss.

"Hunk!" Grace wailed as she reached the trough ahead of the others, "You all right?"

"Most of me is," said Hunk.

"What's happened?"

"It's plain enough. Them hombres was usin' their act as a blind for bank robbin'. While the guitar player was holdin' everybody's interest, Alberti here sneaked out the stage door and cracked the safe. He was figurin' on that fight lastin' long enough for him to sneak back in without anybody bein' any the wiser. That red-head hombre the marshal gunned was standin' guard for him."

"Hunk," I said, clearin' my throat. "It was lucky for you that fight turned out—uh, like it did."

"Lucky?" My deputy glared at me. "I told you I had a hunch. Accordin' to the paper, the Sage City bank was robbed the same night these hombres played there. It was the same at Elk River. I was watchin' for some move from 'em tonight!"

Well, maybe he had been, but I still thought my itchin' powder was a big factor. I was willin' to let that drop if Hunk was, however. "So what's lucky about it?" Hunk asked, belligerent.

"Nothin'," I answered, hasty. "You're smarter'n I thought. I was just thinkin' about that five hundred dollars reward you're goin' to collect."

"You'd better collect Alberti and that guitar player that thought he could fight," Hunk said. He looked pretty satisfied.

"No hurry about Rudy," the cowpoke with the turnip said. "I've counted fifty over him already, but he's still out cold."

"Hunk, you're a hero," Grace said. "Why don't you get out of that horse trough?"

"I like it here," said Hunk. "Why don't you try it?"

He laid hold of her and started dragging her in with him.

"Hunk!" she squawked. "Hunk—let go!"

He dunked her, calm-like, and she came up gaspin'. Then he put his mouth over hers and she shut up complete.

"Show's over folks," I announced, grinnin'. "But you've had your money's worth. Go home and read the rest in the paper."

Includin' Hunk's and Grace's weddin' announcement, I figured.

Dave drew Ruth Ann into his arms

TROUBLE BREWING

By BILL ANSON

"You keep away from the girl or put a gun on your hip—" Dave Stewart is warned when he signs on the Dart Ranch!

WHEN Ruth Ann sighted the wind-whipped banners and dancing flags of the rodeo grandstand, her heart began to thump with excitement. This year in the Pecos Stampede she was to be a contestant for the first time. Her trick sorrel pony, Sergeant, was attached by halter rope to the tailgate of the buckboard that was taking her and her father, Bill Dart, to town.

"Oh, Dad!" Ruth Ann's voice was trembling with excitement. "I've just *got* to win my first try."

"You won't if you don't calm down and take things easy," Bill Dart answered with a sly grin. "Just make as if you believe you're puttin' your pony through his paces in our ranch corral. I've told you lots of times that the mark of a professional is a cool head. Back on the rodeo circuit in the old days when I was riding, there was a girl who. . . ."

Ruth Ann's father launched into another of his long tales about the time when he was the State bucking champion. In addition to many medals and ribbons to show for those days, Bill Dart also had a badly crippled leg, which he had received when a loco bronc crashed into the arena fence. His prize money had been invested in a small breeding ranch near the town of Pecos. But after the death of Mrs. Dart things had not gone so well for Bill Dart and his daughter. Now Ruth Ann felt it was up to her to earn money

for new stock and to fill the larder.

She had won out over her father's protests that the rodeo ring was no place for a girl as pretty as she was. Her sea-green eyes and golden hair were the talk of the Pecos River country. Range gossip said that Ruth Ann would soon be wearing "Curly" Lambert's brand, and that it would be wise for young buckaroos to forget her. Curly Lambert was not only the biggest grower of rodeo stock along the Pecos River, but also the owner of most of the town of Pecos.

What Ruth Ann had to say about her purported engagement would have burned the ears off Curly Lambert. She was no man's woman. Her chief interest in life was horses, not swaggering young swains.

Ruth Ann had bottle-fed her pony Sergeant as a colt. She had trained him to do tricks that not even her father had seen on the rodeo circuit. Starting this day, she meant to make a reputation for herself as one of the most skilled riders of the West. That was why her heart was thumping so wildly as the buckboard carried her past the rodeo grounds and into the main street of Pecos.

The moment the crowds before the false-fronted stores saw Ruth Ann's pretty costume, they knew she was a performer and a cheer went up. She wore a frilled buckskin blouse, divided riding skirt, and cream colored half-boots. Her white Stetson had a fancy rattlesnake skin band, and about her neck was a fancy bright-hued silk scarf with Indian drawings.

"Watch out for Sergeant!" Bill Dart said warningly as the belted and booted men along the plank sidewalks uttered loud "yippees" and cowboy yells.

RUTH ANN had already sensed the growing nervousness of her horse. This was the first time that her lovely sorrel had been in a big crowd. The movements of dusty buggies and saddle broncs on the street were beginning to frighten Sergeant. Had the pony not been tied to the buckboard's tailgate, Sergeant would have run away.

As Ruth Ann swung over the front seat and quickly crawled through the wagon box to reach the pony's halter rope, she heard several firecrackers explode in the roadway. She caught one swift glimpse of a group of boisterous punchers, just drunk enough to be unthinking and mischievous, standing in front of the town hotel. They were the Gun Ranch hands, and Curly Lambert, their boss, was with them.

The Gun Ranch owner was waving to Ruth Ann. He didn't see what she saw. A hilarious member of Curly's outfit had ignited the fuse of a cannon cracker, and the puncher now threw it into the road toward the hoofs of the buckboard team that Bill Dart was driving.

Before Ruth Ann could release Sergeant's halter at the tailgate, the cannon cracker exploded. At once the buckboard team reared up in terror. The rig careened over on its side. The next moment, the team was leaping out in panic, and the rig was dragging at Sergeant's halter. For a short distance the buckboard lurched from one side to the other before a swingletree tore loose, and the rig turned over.

Bill Dart shouted in anger as he went sprawling into the roadway. Ruth Ann was thrown clear out of the back of the buckboard. Her sorrel pony was dragged down to its knees, where it fought in the dirt to get up again.

The girl landed hard in the road, but she was quickly on her feet, running to help her trick horse.

Tearing the halter buckle open, she released Sergeant from the rope that held him to the back of the overturned buckboard. The sorrel frantically was trying to get up on its legs. Ruth Ann gripped him by the mane and talked soothingly in an effort to calm his terror.

"Don't fight the pony Miss!" a voice cried to Ruth Ann. "Looks like he's hurt. Let him go. He'll do better by himself."

Instead of rising completely, Sergeant sank back to earth again and slid his left foreleg out straight. Two arms, strong as bands of steel, closed around Ruth Ann. They belonged to the man who had spoken, behind her. He drew her away from the frantic sorrel.

"Please let me go!" she said breathlessly, turning about. "You're right. My pony is injured."

"He has to find that out himself," the tall stranger answered. "Watch him. He's getting up now."

In her concern for the sorrel, Ruth Ann was only dimly aware that the man helping her was dressed in the fancy calfskin vest and bullhide chaps of a rodeo performer. She failed to notice until later how blue and serious were his eyes, and how handsomely shaped was his strong, firm jaw.

Sergeant was shaking with fear as he scrambled up and stood stiff-legged, with his eyes rolling wildly. Dirt covered his smoothly curried flank. He lifted his left foreleg and pawed the earth nervously, then put the leg

down, and turned his head to look at Ruth Ann.

"Sergeant!" she cried. The man released his grip. Ruth Ann rushed forward and threw her arms about the neck of the trick horse. Then she let go, stepped back and tried to see if there was anything wrong.

A crowd was gathering. The horse backed away from Ruth Ann. As he moved she saw he was limping slightly.

"Get back, friends," the tall rodeo performer in the calfskin vest called out. "Give the bronc a little room."

It was at this moment that Curly Lambert arrived.

"I'll take charge here, Dave Stewart," the owner of the Gun Ranch said sharply. "You better get on over to the arena if you intend to ride in the bucking contest for my outfit. My girl doesn't need any more help from you."

"*Your* girl!" Ruth Ann exclaimed, turning toward the big-shouldered Curly Lambert. "I never was and I never will be that, Curly Lambert! It was one of your punchers who threw that firecracker. Oh, but you all are hateful!" She swung away as she saw her father limping up to the sorrel. "Dad, are you hurt?" she asked.

"It's Sergeant I'm worrying about," Bill Dart answered evasively, but his pale cheeks revealed that he had not escaped the accident without harm. "The team is getting chased through town and the buckboard is ruined plenty."

"I fired the hand who threw the cannon cracker, Mr. Dart," Curly Lambert said apologetically. "Also, since it was him who was responsible for the bustin' of your buckboard, you have the blacksmith fix it and I'll pay all the bills."

Ruth Ann's temper got the better of her.

"You knew this was my one chance to become a circuit rider, Curly Lambert!" she flared up. "And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if you didn't plan the whole thing. Look at my pony now. You can't make any amends for Sergeant with your money."

"Shucks, I'll buy the cayuse at top price and lend you one of my broncs for the show," the Gun Ranch boss said, grinning at the irate girl.

The rodeo performer in the calfskin vest had not gone away. Now he spoke reassuringly to Ruth Ann.

"He's more frightened than hurt," the tall stranger said.

"Are you sure?" she asked him anxiously. "He's a trick horse. I trained him myself."

"Just a minor strain in his left foreleg, Miss. It's not serious. But don't try to ride him today. It's best not to. I know a lot about trick broncs."

"Nobody is asking your opinion, Stewart," Curly Lambert snapped. "I told you once before to get over to the rodeo ring if you're riding for me. I'll handle this."

"Are you riding in the contests for the Gun Ranch?" Ruth Ann asked Dave Stewart, eyeing him with sudden disfavor.

"I reckon I *was* riding," Stewart answered, forcing a hard smile.

Ruth Ann turned to her father.

"I'll take Sergeant over to the ring and see if he's able to go through his tricks," she said. "It would be better if Doctor Small looked at your leg, Dad. Don't take a cent of Curly Lambert's money. We are through with him."

"That suits me," Bill Dart replied, handing Ruth Ann the halter that he had released from the tailgate of the overturned buckboard.

The crowd began to break up as Ruth Ann haltered Sergeant. Curly Lambert made no move to help her. She saw Dave Stewart walk over to a hitch-rail and swing aboard a big black horse and ride off.

When she led Sergeant down the street toward the rodeo grounds, the pony limped slightly. Once the sorrel halted to rub its nose on its left foreleg. When Sergeant lifted his head again, he looked at Ruth Ann with appealing eyes, then tried to walk without a limp.

CONCERN for Sergeant kept Ruth Ann from participating in the thrill of this picturesque Western rodeo. She ignored the lively band music, the gaily dressed crowds, the bright costumes and the jokes of the light-spirited throngs. The grandstand was rapidly filling with women in gay Summer dresses and their escorts in ten gallon hats. Over at the end of the arena, steers were kicking in the chutes, and now and then a wild horse squealed with fright and anger.

With Sergeant in tow, Ruth Ann passed through the open gate to the big corral where the performers' saddle ponies were kept. Several friends greeted her. The rodeo veterinary came up to ask her what had happened out on the main street.

"A rider for the Gun Ranch just told me to bandage the left foreleg of your sorrel," the white-haired vet added. "His name is Dave Stewart."

"I don't need any advice from Curly Lambert's employes," Ruth Ann said. "But some liniment for Sergeant would help."

The vet went to work swiftly while a crowd of performers gathered to express their sympathies to the girl. Ruth Ann saw that Dave Stewart was not among them, although his big black cayuse was tied to the rails at the far end of the corral. When the loudspeaker blasted on the grandstand side of the arena, all the performers ran to their broncs for the big parade.

Ruth Ann's heart sank. She had planned so long on this rodeo. It was to have been the first one in which she was privileged to ride past the grandstand as a contestant.

"Better let the pony rest," the veterinary said after he had finished wrapping the sorrel's left leg with cotton. "I can see he's a trick horse. He'll be wary of putting that left hoof down. My advice is to get another horse for the show."

"That means I'll have to withdraw," Ruth Ann said. "Will it hurt Sergeant to work out?"

"It won't hurt the pony, but you can't expect good results," the veterinary replied. "The sorrel barked his fetlock joint above the hoof. The lower part of the leg is sore like your thumb would be if you tapped it with a hammer."

Ruth Ann's heart sank. She walked across the corral and looked at the parade now carrying the Stars and Stripes past the reviewing box. As she stood there, trying to keep her tears back, the performers came on around the arena and then broke line at the chutes. Now the crowd was cheering so loudly that no one could understand what the announcer was saying through the loudspeaker.

The rodeo had begun. The first contest was trick roping. The first team ran out into the open to the platform laid on the ground, and there a cowboy and a cowgirl started spinning ropes. The spectators quieted down. And Ruth Ann could hear the announcer giving the names of the performers.

Her interest died away. She turned back across the corral to inspect Sergeant standing tied to the rails. Performers were putting up their mounts and choosing new ones. Everybody was too busy to pay any attention to Ruth Ann. She slowly saddled her sorrel, then led the pony across the corral twice, watching to see if the horse limped. Sergeant was walking easily on all four legs, but his spirit was down. The horse took no interest in what was going on around him.

"Are you going to ride, Ruth Ann?" one of the girl performers called. "You'd better get ready."

For the first time, Ruth Ann realized that the contestants now were watching her closely. This was her first performance. Everybody was curious to learn how her act would be received.

As Ruth Ann swung to the saddle, she forced a smile, and she was glad to see that her friends replied with confident grins. Several wished her good luck as she rode throuh the gate into the arena. Sergeant was stepping none too lightly. He constantly nodded his head up and down, shaking his mane, tossing the bit in his mouth.

Now the band swung into a waltz. A roar of approval shook the stand. The loudspeaker announced the start of the trick riding contest. Ruth Ann Dart's name was given as the first contestant.

Tickling Sergeant with her spurs, she started at an easy lope down the arena toward the stand. At once it became apparent that the sorrel was afraid. A piece of white paper made him shy, which indicated that Sergeant's mind would never remain on the schooling Ruth Ann had given him. She was forced to apply spurs to get the pony loping again.

AS SHE passed the grandstand she took her hat and waved it at the crowd. The applause again made Sergeant shy. Ruth Ann halted at the far end of the arena, then spurred the pony for the return trip. Her first stunt was to stand in the saddle, with the toes of her boots snugged under two straps fastened to the hull near the root of the saddle tree. It was very important that Sergeant maintain a steady stride.

Ruth Ann drew herself up in the saddle and thrust one boot into the toe strap. For the first time she knew cold fear. If Sergeant should misbehave she might be killed or crippled for life. Sergeant was loping steadily. The girl took a chance and thrust her other toe into the saddle strap, then stood up straight, allowing her body to sway with the rhythm of the horse.

Now Sergeant was approaching the grandstand. Ruth Ann removed her white Stetson and started to wave it. A roar of applause started. Sergeant broke stride. He almost pitched the girl over his head. Had she not been waiting for just such a thing, she surely would have had a dreadful accident. But her knees flexed, and she came down into the saddle with speed, catching at the pommel with both hands.

Her hat was lost. Ruth Ann tried desperately to hide the truth of Sergeant's error from the spectators, but she couldn't fool the

judges. Her hat went rolling across the track like a lost dogie, clamoring for attention. Ruth Ann swung her leg over the saddle horn and tried to finish out her first trick by riding backwards. Though the crowd applauded, she knew she was through for the day.

Sergeant had failed her. She would never be able to try any of her dangerous stunts on a shying pony.

Ruth Ann rode on down the arena and into the corral.

"Tough luck, cowgirl," one puncher called to her. "I'll get your hat."

"We're sorry, partner," a girl performer came up to say. "You're sure wise not to continue on that sorrel. We could speak to the judges and get you another chance on my bronc."

"No," Ruth Ann replied stoutly. "I only want Sergeant, and he is not to be blamed."

It was not until she had unsaddled her sorrel and fastened a nosebag of oats to its head that Ruth Ann took complete stock of the situation. She had hoped for a share of the prize money that day. It would have tided her and her father over for another year until their small herd of stock was ready for market. But now there would be nothing but hard times in prospect for them.

As she thought of the buckboard accident she walked over to the corral gate and glanced at the chutes where the bucking horse riders were getting ready for their event. She saw Dave Stewart talking with several rodeo officials. There seemed to be an argument going on. Curly Lambert soon walked up. He turned on his new rider with clenched fists. The rodeo officials stepped between them. Then Curly stalked off, mad as a hornet.

"I hope something happened to him to spoil his plans the way his tough punchers spoiled my plans," Ruth Ann said aloud, and she turned to watch the trick riding before the grandstand.

It was hard to watch the contest through, for the contestants were doing the very things that Ruth Ann had practised so long. And she had had some new stunts that would have opened their eyes. Discouraged, she went back to sit on an upturned water bucket near her sorrel.

The blare of the distant brass band told her that the trick riding exhibition was over. She heard the names of the winners, then the applause of the crowd. The girl riders started coming into the corral. They were so excited about the prizes that they forgot all about Ruth Ann.

The loudspeaker was again in operation, calling out the next event—the cowboys' wild horse riding contest with saddles.

"There's been a program change, folks," the announcer said through the loudspeaker. "Dave Stewart, a newcomer to our rodeo, will ride for the Dart Ranch instead of the Gun Ranch. The Gun Ranch has entered Needles Burke in place of Dave Stewart."

Ruth Ann sprang to her feet.

"What was that!" she cried. "Did the announcer say that Dave Stewart was riding for my outfit? It's a mistake."

At that moment a rodeo official walked into the corral. He only heard part of the question which Ruth Ann put to her friends. The tall man with the official badge on his chest walked over to the girl.

"Miss Dart, I thought that Dave Stewart spoke to you before making the change between ranches," the official said. "He told us that the Gun Ranch had been responsible for injuring your pony, so it was only fair for the outfit to make up the prize money to you by his ride—if he wins."

"I don't want any prize money from the Gun Ranch," Ruth Ann insisted desperately. "What's more, I saw that Curly Lambert did not approve of the program change."

"There's nothing we can do about it now," the official replied. "Stewart has already started on his ride. You'll have to argue things out with him later."

AS THE grandstand thundered with shouts, Ruth Ann looked through the corral gate into the arena to see Dave Stewart topping a vicious sunfishing bronc. He rode high, wide, and handsome. His waving ten-gallon hat was in his left hand, while his right fingers held the halter rope. With each crashing jump of the wild horse, Stewart scratched the animal with his spurs.

The strange puncher was an expert. There was no doubt about it. And the rodeo throng knew it and accorded him his just applause. The jolting wild bronc could not shake him loose as it bucked clear across the arena.

The three-minute gong clanged, and two pick-up men rode out to take Stewart off the back of the plunging cayuse. Swiftly he changed from his saddle to the back of a pick-up horse, and the wild horse went plunging away without his rider.

"What a ride!" cried the rodeo official. "The prize is in the bag for Dave Stewart. You're lucky, Miss Dart."

"Not as lucky as you think," Ruth Ann answered, for she could see Curly Lambert slipping between the rails of the corral.

"May I speak to you a moment, girlie," Lambert called out, his mouth twisting in a sheepish smile. "I want to talk about your sorrel pony."

Ruth Ann walked across the corral and confronted the Gun Ranch boss.

"Do I have to thank you for Dave Stewart's ride and prize money?" Ruth Ann asked, her blue eyes flashing. "If that is the case, you are wrong, Curly Lambert, because I'm accepting no favors from you."

"I had nothing to do with Stewart riding for your ranch," Lambert answered suavely. "Me and Stewart had a little argument, so he quit my outfit. He wanted to ride in the show, but he could only to do it by riding for a ranch in these parts. It was too late to enter the contest as an independent performer. I just wanted to tell you that. He took a ride with your Dart Ranch to get into the show."

"Is that all you have to say?" Ruth Ann demanded, suspecting that Lambert had not only come to the corral to tell her about Stewart.

"Don't be so panicky, Ruth Ann," the Gun Ranch boss said, reaching out to take her hand. "You know darned well that I'm plumb in love with you. I want to marry you. I'm so sorry about what happened today that I'll buy that sorrel pony for top price."

Ruth Ann yanked her hand away.

"You'll never buy me or my sorrel!" she cried sharply. "You can't bribe me. You know how badly Pa and I needed the prize money. If you think I would sell Sergeant to you, you're crazy."

"Now, wait a minute, girlie," Lambert interrupted. "You don't have to sell Sergeant. You marry me and you'll be able to keep the pony. I'll tide Bill Dart over with some breeding stock for the rodeo circuit. For a poor girl, you certainly have uppity ideas."

At that moment Dave Stewart strode up in his batwing chaps.

He stopped the words of retort on Ruth Ann's lips.

"Miss Dart, I couldn't speak to you before the ride, but I want to say that the prize money is yours," Stewart said, glancing at Curly Lambert. "I'm well paid by getting a blue ribbon. That's all I wanted."

"That's what you say!" Curly Lambert flared up, fists clenching. "You hired out to me, Stewart, and then you quit at the last moment. I'm not forgetting that. What's more, I'm telling you to keep away from this girl, or put a gun on your hip."

Ruth Ann's dislike for Curly Lambert increased.

"I'll choose my companions, Mr. Lambert," she said coldly. "Who they are is none of your business." She turned to Dave Stewart. "I am sorry that I can't accept the prize money, but I want you to know that I am grateful."

Dave Stewart grinned at Curly Lambert, then turned to Ruth Ann, as if the Gun Ranch boss no longer counted.

"No need to be grateful for something you don't accept, Miss Dart," Stewart said. "I'm looking for a job. I'd be powerful obliged to you if I could work at the Dart outfit. If you won't take the prize money, how about letting me work out the same amount of cash?"

Ruth Ann's eyes caught the sudden swing of Curly Lambert's fist. The Gun Ranch boss was stepping in to smash Stewart behind the ear. She cried out in alarm. She didn't think that Dave Stewart was aware of the danger, but the strange puncher was no fool. Stewart had evidently expected foul play. He had been watching Curly Lambert's shadow. He ducked and the fist of the Gun Ranch owner sailed over his head.

Then the cowboy came bobbing up and his fist swung in an uppercut which caught the unbalanced Curly Lambert flush on the jaw. Lambert's eyes bulged. His face turned deathly pale as he staggered back. He fell backward and lay still in the dirt of the corral.

Dave Stewart chuckled, turned to Ruth Ann and presented his arm.

"Now, if you will allow me, I will take you to the grandstand to see the rest of the rodeo. We might have supper together later on and talk over that proposition. I'm sure stuck on that sorrel pony of yours, Ruth Ann. It's almost as pretty as you."

WHILE Ruth Ann's acceptance of Dave Stewart's invitation might have been for the purpose of showing Curly Lambert exactly how she felt, it had another result.

Dave Stewart was not a greenhorn bronc stomper with ambitions to become a professional rodeo rider. He was a skilled horseman who had wandered far and wide, breaking broncs for ranchers. Curly Lambert had hired him to break a horse string, and upon seeing Stewart's prowess, Lambert had entered Stewart in the rodeo to win local honors for the Gun Ranch. Lambert evidently suspected Stewart's charm, and that was why the Gun Ranch boss had been so

eager to keep the puncher away from Ruth Ann.

At supper in the Pecos Hotel, after Ruth Ann had called at the doctor's cabin and found her father comfortably resting on a divan, the girl soon discovered Dave Stewart's winning personality. He knew exactly how to play the gallant host. He ordered a beautiful dinner and saw that it was properly served. There was an orchestra in the hotel lounge to entertain the rodeo guests, and Dave Stewart suggested a dance.

Once in his arms, Ruth Ann knew she had met a real dance partner. Stewart soon taught her a new step, And before long all the eyes of the guests were upon them. Tall and graceful, Stewart guided her about the dance floor. He made no attempt to put his cheek against hers. But Ruth Ann felt a certain possessiveness tingling from his arms into her being.

When they had sat down at the table again, Dave Stewart regarded her for a long moment.

"Is it a deal?" he asked her, finally. "I'll work out that prize money as a hand on your ranch. It would keep me close to rodeo stock. From what I've learned in this town, your father has some fine bucking broncs and wild steers that he is breeding for rodeos. I could learn a lot by tending them."

Ruth Ann drew a deep breath. From the doctor that afternoon she had learned that her father was in no condition to do any hard work. Evidently Dave Stewart didn't know how small the Dart Ranch was. He would have to do many chores humiliating to a cowboy. But Ruth Ann could not bring herself to refuse Dave Stewart. If she did, he might ride out of Pecos and out of her life forever.

"Perhaps you had better drive out to the ranch this evening with Pa and me," she said seriously. "Then we'll make up our minds after you have seen how things are."

"That's the stuff!" Stewart exclaimed, a light in his blue eyes. "And now, how about another dance before the ice cream is served?"

It was late that evening before the buckboard which had overturned in the main street was repaired and the trip to the Dart Ranch commenced. When Ruth Ann and Dave Stewart drove to the doctor's cabin to get Bill Dart, the rancher had to be carried out to the wagon box. On the long drive over the plains and hills, Bill Dart slept peacefully on straw packed in the rig. Ruth Ann and her new puncher sat side by side in the moonlight, while the team clopped easily along the trail. Sergeant followed the rig.

The next day at the Dart Ranch Dave Stewart announced his intention of remaining. There was no arguing with the tall blue-eyed cowboy. He took charge of the chores as if he were a member of the family. And Ruth Ann centered her attention upon the kitchen, determined to make the best of the small larder.

The only person who seemed worried was Bill Dart. His bad leg required rest. He lay on a cot, his eyes upon the ceiling, thinking hard. When Ruth Ann came in to bring him a hot cup of tea, Bill's irritation exploded.

"Just an invalid!" he exclaimed. "I'm no good to anybody. That's what comes of sowing wild oats on the rodeo circuit. I should have spent my time building a ranch. And now you've gone and fallen in love with an hombre who wants to follow the circuit. And you want to become a rodeo star."

"Pa!" Ruth Ann answered reproachfully. "I'm not in love with anyone. I'm only interested in training Sergeant into the best trick pony in the world. Dave Stewart is only trying to do what is fair. He won the prize money because he was riding for our outfit."

"Pish posh!" Bill Dart retorted. "He's here because he's in love with you. He cut out Curly Lambert and there's going to be trouble. You mark my words, girl, Lambert is no man to take this lying down."

"You are just making up stories to frighten me," Ruth Ann answered, and she left the room.

But Bill Dart was not making up stories. He knew a great deal about Curly Lambert. Dart's ranch was about to compete with the Gun Ranch in the sale of rodeo stock. Bill Dart realized that the Gun Ranch boss did not look upon this competition with favor. The only reason that Lambert had allowed the Dart Ranch to exist next to the Gun Ranch had been that Lambert expected to acquire it by marrying Ruth Ann.

NOW, with Dave Stewart lending a hand at the Dart Ranch, Lambert almost certainly would start moving behind the scenes.

It was not a week after Dave Stewart took charge of the range that the local banker from Pecos drove up in a surrey. Small and wiry, wearing gold-rimmed glasses perched on a red hook of a nose, Harry P. Sutton climbed down from his rig, climbed the steps of the Dart veranda and knocked on the front door. Ruth Ann had heard the arrival

of the surrey. She conducted Sutton into the living room of the ranchhouse, where Bill Dart was reclining in a big Morris chair.

"Jest thought I'd call to see how you are, Bill," Sutton began, rubbing his scrawny hands together. "There's talk in town that you got a stranger working for you."

"That's right, Sutton," Bill Dart replied with a frown. "Are you getting worried about the money I owe you?"

"No, not that, Bill," Sutton answered, glancing nervously at Ruth Ann. "I figure you'll be able to pay up the installment on the loan next month just like you always do. But I was wondering how you could pay that puncher high bronc-stomping wages at the same time."

Ruth Ann interrupted Sutton.

"That's our private business, Mr. Sutton," she said.

"Certainly it is your private business, Miss Dart," the banker said quickly. "I never meddle in how a man runs his outfit. And I know you aim to sell off a small herd of rodeo stock to meet the loan. But what I'm driving at is different. There's talk in Pecos that this young puncher who calls himself Dave Stewart is really somebody else."

"What do you mean by that, Sutton?" Bill Dart demanded.

"Well, folks are saying that this Dave Stewart is a Border hopper, Bill," the banker said smoothly. "You know what that signifies. They think he has been mixed up with rustling Texas cattle across the Rio Grande."

"What proof have you got?" Ruth Ann demanded.

"Well, the sheriff in town has got a warning from the Cattle Association to be on the watch for an hombre who looks like Dave Stewart. His real name is Don Stalling," Sutton answered. "He's tall and has blue eyes, and is powerful handsome with the ladies. He gets hired on ranches because he's a champ bronc rider. Then, the next thing you know, cattle begins to vanish."

Bill Dart flashed a trouble glance at his golden-haired daughter. Ruth Ann stood taut and defiant.

"If that's all you came to say, then you can leave, Mr. Sutton," she said coldly. "I don't think Dave Stewart is the man that the sheriff is looking for."

"Don't take no offense, Miss Dart," Sutton pleaded. "I don't mean no harm. I just wanted to make sure that everything was all right out here. I got obligations to meet next month, and I'll be waiting for the next installment on the loan."

With this veiled warning, the banker turned out the door and climbed into the surrey and drove off in a cloud of dust.

"Curly Lambert sent that horrible penny-pincher out here to worry us," Ruth Ann told Bill Dart. "Curly owns a big share of the bank. You know that, Dad. I wouldn't pay any attention to Sutton's false alarm."

Bill Dart nodded. He closed his eyes and lay back in the Morris chair. But he was troubled. He knew that young buckaroos didn't work for nothing. Dave Stewart was too wise a man to waste time with a small outfit when he could be drawing top wages

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with Curly Lambert or some other big ranch. Was there a chance that Stewart's interest in Ruth Ann was only a ruse?

Bill Dart spent the rest of the day trying to find the answer.

Ruth Ann put on her frontier breeches and an attractive blouse that afternoon. She saddled Sergeant at the corral and rode down the range to the Antelope Creek pasture to talk with Dave Stewart.

She found him collecting stray stock from the surrounding gullies and timber to make a sale herd.

Stewart waved his hat and came on the gallop to meet her.

"It sure is a welcome relief from work, Ruth Ann," the puncher greeted her. "I've been hoping all morning that you would pay a visit, and I'd almost given up."

Ruth Ann studied the tall rider seriously.

"Dave, don't you think it would be better to move this stock up closer to the ranchhouse?" she said. "In a week we'll have to take it to town, and I don't want anything to happen to it."

"Nothing can happen to it, Ruth Ann," Stewart assured her. "There is better grazing here. You want the stock in the best of condition when it goes to the rodeo market. That means a lot to the buyers. It's quite safe down here." He paused. "Let's ride up on yonder knoll in the shade. I want to talk to you about something that's on my mind."

"What is it about?" Ruth Ann asked nervously.

"It's about your sorrel pony," Dave Stewart answered with a flush which made his face handsomer than ever.

RUTH ANN rode stirrup-to-stirrup with the bronc stomper up the grade to a lovely knoll. They dismounted and stood looking at each other. Ruth Ann felt warm blood rise to her cheeks. They were so much alone in the great open world. It had taken time for them to get acquainted. And the odd part of this relationship was that they were more embarrassed than they had been before.

"Yes, Dave?" Ruth Ann said. "What was it about Sergeant?"

"I was thinking that he'd make the finest trick horse in the world," Dave Stewart said nervously. "But that's not all. It's you, Ruth Ann. I've wandered around an awful lot looking for somebody like you."

"No, Dave!" Ruth Ann was distressed. "You mustn't start saying things you and I will regret."

"But I can't help it!" Stewart exclaimed. He stepped forward and took Ruth Ann in his arms.

She tried to hold him off, but she couldn't. A great happiness suddenly welled up from within her like an intoxicating flood and all thoughts of resistance vanished. As she was drawn into the bronc stomper's arms, she felt as if she had always belonged there. His lips dropped to hers and Ruth Ann gave him back the warmth of her fresh, sweet kiss. For long they stood holding each other tightly. And then, within Ruth Ann's heart was born a tiny pain that telegraphed a warning to her mind.

She drew back.

"No, Dave, it is not fair!" she protested. "This is something I didn't want to happen. We mustn't—we mustn't!"

Dave Stewart refused to let her go.

"I'm in love with you, Ruth Ann," he pleaded. "I knew it from the first time I saw you in Pecos. You must understand that. It's the reason I'm here. I'm through with wandering."

Ruth Ann broke from his arms.

"From wandering where, Dave?" she asked, flushing. "From wandering along the Rio Grande, from the United States to Mexico? Oh, Dave, who are you and what are you really doing here?"

Dave Stewart tensed.

"What do you mean by that, Ruth Ann? Why should you mention the Border? Who has been talking to you?"

Ruth Ann turned to her sorrel pony.

"You are worried, Dave," she said, and she swung to the saddle as he leaped forward to help her, but she mounted by herself. "I think you had better make up your mind to tell me the truth about your life, Dave."

"It was Curly Lambert!" Dave Stewart exclaimed. "He said something to you. You have seen him again."

Ruth Ann only tightened the reins and galloped away.

When she returned to the ranchhouse, she found Bill Dart hobbling about the living room, collecting papers.

"What did you find out?" the Dart owner asked.

Ruth Ann's jaw set stubbornly.

"I didn't find out anything, Dad," she said tartly. "But you can bet Curly Lambert is behind all this business. Dave Stewart is no outlaw. He is not wanted by the sheriff. If he is, why doesn't the sheriff ride out here and arrest him?"

"I don't know," Bill Dart answered. "But I do know that Sutton has already dunned us for his loan, and that looks bad. We bet-

ter get that herd to Pecos as soon as we can."

"Is that why you got up from the chair?" Ruth Ann asked. "You can just go back to resting again."

"I'm taking orders from nobody," Bill Dart answered stubbornly. "This outfit needs a boss, and I'm nominated."

Ruth Ann went on to the kitchen to prepare the vegetables for dinner. She knew there was little use in arguing with Bill Dart. He would do just as he pleased.

That evening, when Dave Stewart rode in for supper, Bill Dart said nothing about the banker's visit to the ranchhouse. Ruth Ann maintained a strict dignity. Stewart himself was reserved. The meal passed with very little conversation. It was obvious that there was tension in the air.

"I reckon I'll take a little ride into Pecos," Dave Stewart said, getting up from the table. "I won't be back until late, so don't get worried if you don't see a light in the bunkhouse."

Through a window Ruth Ann watched him ride off on his big black cayuse. She didn't know but that he was going for good. If such was the case, it was best for her.

SHE went to bed early and lay tossing for hours. The silvery beams filtering through the lace curtains at her window, kept reminding her of the moonlight ride home in the repaired buckboard from the rodeo when Dave Stewart had sat beside her and Bill Dart had been asleep in the wagon box on a pile of straw. Never until then had Ruth Ann known such quiet peacefulness. Now all the fear of life had returned.

She slept fitfully along toward dawn, and she was up early to prepare breakfast. Bill Dart was out of bed as soon as the scent of coffee permeated the ranchhouse. He hobbled out on to the porch and banged the big steel ring that served as a dinner bell.

Dave Stewart did not answer the summons.

Bill Dart hobbled down to the bunk house. He returned with a serious face.

"He never came back from Pecos," the rancher snapped. "I reckon he's flown the coop."

A terrible fear assailed Ruth Ann. She hurriedly gulped down her oatmeal and coffee and, without, waiting for wheatcakes, she went out to the barn and saddled Sergeant. Then she mounted at once and galloped down to the Antelope Creek pasture.

The Dart herd was gone!

"No wonder Dave Stewart didn't want to bring the stock up near the ranchhouse!" Ruth Ann cried. "He stole it last night."

On the ride back to the ranch headquarters, Ruth Ann didn't know what she would say to her father. It was because of her that Bill Dart had trusted Dave Stewart. Yet Ruth Ann herself could not believe that the bronc stomper had turned so treacherously upon the Darts. She couldn't forget the look in his eyes, the afternoon before, when he had held her in his arms and told her that he loved her.

Had she not resisted, had she told him that he had won her heart, he might not have gone back to his old ways. He might have reformed. But now it was too late.

The sale herd was gone and Bill Dart stood to lose his ranch.

"I'll sell Sergeant," Ruth Ann decided, brushing tears from her eyes. "It is the only way that Pa can meet the installment on his loan. I've got to do it. I'll have to sell Sergeant to Curly Lambert."

Bill Dart was standing on the ranchhouse veranda with the aid of a cane, when Ruth Ann rode up. The scowl on her father's face told her that he suspected the worst. As Ruth Ann dismounted, he tried to smile.

"Don't tell me, partner," he called to her. "I can figure what happened. But we aren't licked yet. I've put my faith in men before and found them wanting."

But it took a great deal of arguing to convince Bill Dart that Sergeant had to be sacrificed. In fact, it took the entire day. Bill Dart himself couldn't help wandering out to the ranchhouse veranda and looking at the long road toward Pecos, as if he expected to see the tall figure of Dave Stewart topping a bronc in the distance.

At the supper table, Bill Dart made an announcement.

"Hitch up the buckboard, partner," he said. "I'm going to take a little pasear into Pecos to talk with Sutton. Mebbe I can stall him off. I don't want to see him at the bank. I'll catch him at his home. You stay here and get a good night's rest."

"You intend to find out if Dave Stewart is in town!" Ruth Ann exclaimed. "I am going with you."

"No, you're not!" Bill Dart snapped. "I'm going alone. This is a man's work, not a girl's."

Ruth Ann went out to the corral for the team. She was finished harnessing the span of bays to the buckboard when Bill Dart came limping across the ranch-yard, using his cane. He was wearing his old black Stetson and shabby dark blue suit. He looked

poorer than a church mouse, and Ruth Ann felt a deep anguish tear her heart.

"Good luck, Dad," was all that she could say when Bill Dart drove off.

She sat on the ranchhouse steps, too worn out to go in and clean up the supper plates. The shadows of night began to fall. A horrible loneliness swept her. The moon was early in rising this night. Just as its golden rim was lifting above the horizon of the plains, Ruth Ann heard the thudding of hoofs. A rider was coming across the range.

Ruth Ann's heart leaped. She wanted to call out, but she held the name of Dave Stewart on her lips.

She recognized him as soon as his big bronc turned past the corral. Stewart came right up to the ranchhouse. He saw her and he smiled.

"Howdy, Miss Dart," Stewart said mockingly, swinging down from the saddle. "Where's your father? I've got business with him."

RUTH ANN wanted to leap up and flee. She didn't want to talk with this man who had injured her so. But she found herself speaking slowly and frigidly.

"My father has gone to Pecos to talk with the banker. If there is any explanation, Mr. Stewart, you can make it to me."

Dave Stewart jingled in his spurse toward her, and she saw that there was a six-gun strapped low to his thigh.

"Bill has gone to town!" he exclaimed. "That's the worst possible thing he could do. They'll be waiting for him."

"Who will be waiting for him?" Ruth Ann asked in alarm.

"The rustlers," Stewart replied. "They tried to stop me last night. Get your gun, Ruth Ann. We've got to help him!"

Ruth Ann jumped to her feet.

"But you must explain!" she cried. "What are you talking about?"

"No time to explain now," Stewart replied, turning to run toward the barn. "I'll get Sergeant saddled."

Ruth Ann turned into the house for her hat and gauntlets. Stewart had told her to get a gun. Dazed, she went into Bill Dart's room for the cartridge belt and holstered .45 that her father always kept hanging above his bureau. The weapon was gone!

Evidently Bill Dart had expected trouble, for he never took his six-gun to town. Ruth Ann wasted no time in trying to solve the mystery which had been suddenly thrust upon her. She ran to her own room and picked up a light hunting rifle, then met Dave Stewart before the ranchhouse. He was mounted on his own big black horse. Sergeant was waiting. Ruth Ann swung to the saddle and they started off on the gallop toward Pecos.

"What has happened, Dave?" Ruth Ann called out to him. "You must tell me."

"The sale herd was rustled last night," Dave Stewart replied loudly. "When somebody tried to bushwhack me on the road to Pecos, I suspected the worst and rode to the Antelope Creek pasture. But I was too late to stop the theft."

"Then it wasn't you who did it!" Ruth Ann said to herself.

But Dave Stewart had sensed what she was thinking. A hard frown creased his brow. He didn't look at her. His quirt went to the flanks of his bronc and the animal began to leave Sergeant behind. Ruth Ann bent over the saddle horn, using her own quirt on her sorrel to catch up.

Bill Dart had a good hour's start on the road to town, but he would drive at a slow trot. Dave Stewart and Ruth Ann pressed their saddle ponies, breaking their gallop only while climbing the hills. The trail ahead was bathed in moonlight where the pair crossed open range. In the hills, the road was laced with dark tree shadows.

A dozen times Ruth Ann told herself that they would never overtake her father, but Dave Stewart kept spurring onward, now and then rising in the stirrups as if he could see through the dark. Ruth Ann herself tried to catch the distant squeak of buckboard wheels above the pounding of their saddle ponies.

Then, quite suddenly, far ahead, both Ruth Ann and Dave Stewart caught a flash of light in the dark. They tensed, listening, and to their ears came the echo of a gun shot. Their spurs went to their broncs. Ruth Ann saw the stomper draw the six-gun on his thigh. As they raced on, fearing the worst, they saw another flash of light, then another. Their horses' hoofs muffled the sound of the firing.

The shots had been a mile away. The ranch girl and the bronc stomper covered that distance in record time. Again and again, they spied the telltale flash of guns. and now they could hear the reports quite plainly.

"Keep back!" Dave Stewart cried out, and he spurred his black cayuse into the lead.

Sergeant was a trick bronc, not a racer. Though Ruth Ann used a quirt on her sorrel, Stewart's powerful mount steadily left the smaller horse behind. Stewart was riding right into the thick of the fight. Ruth

Ann saw him rise up in his stirrups, throwing his gun into aim.

Then he spied a buckboard overturned beside the road. The team had broken out of the traces and was not around. At first glance, there was nobody near the rig. But a chorus of yells from the brush beside the trail told her that men were hiding there. And suddenly Dave Stewart's weapon was blasting bullets into the rocks and greasewoods.

At the same time a familiar voice shouted in the night.

"Give it to 'em, cowboy! They've got him holed up over here in the trees."

It was Bill Dart shouting to Dave Stewart.

HASTILY Ruth Ann threw her rifle to her shoulder and sent a shot into the brush to the right of the trail, where men were now threshing through the branches to escape. Stewart was shooting, too. Ruth Ann heard a yelp of agony. The bronc stomper drove his bronc into the greasewoods and vanished in the night, in hot pursuit of the foe.

As Stewart disappeared, a man in a black silk shirt and chaps ducked out from behind a big boulder farther down the trail. Despite the fact that the night hid his features, Ruth Ann recognized the big-shouldered figure of Curly Lambert. There was a rifle in Lambert's hand. But he was intent on getting away.

"Curly!" Ruth Ann cried, and she kept her pony galloping toward him.

"It ain't Curly!" the voice of Lambert badly disguised floated back. "Keep away from me or I'll shoot."

Then, without warning, Dave Stewart's big black horse came leaping out of the greasewoods beside the road. Stewart evidently had heard the death warning. Curly Lambert whirled to throw up his rifle and shoot, but Stewart's six-gun blasted flame-split thunder. And Curly Lambert pitched his length in the road.

Dragging her sorrel to a halt, Ruth Ann swung down from the saddle and bent over the shuddering form of Curly Lambert. A dark wet pool was forming on his shirt front. His lips were drawn back from his teeth.

"How did you find out?" Curly Lambert breathed in pain. "I could have got away with it if it hadn't been for that bronc stomper."

Dave Stewart came up and drew Ruth

(Concluded on page 97)

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(Continued from page 6)

Eager to help in every way to cut down the coyote numbers that have reached almost alarming proportions in some districts, game officials have given out bait pointers for trappers. Best bait, they say, is poisoned pork fat. The coyotes seem to relish it. More important, it disintegrates in a reasonable length of time after being set out.

Lean meat on the other hand will dry out. Then along comes a rain. The meat swells with the moisture and a pet dog or some other domestic animal tries the poison-laden morsel and gets killed.

Figures show that last year in Texas some 9,000 pounds of fat were used by Texas game commission to provide about 80,000 poison baits.

Bounty for Coyotes

The estimated kill was between 4000 and 5000 coyotes. Nevertheless, so bad has the coyote menace become in some areas that locally counties have been authorized to pay up to $5 bounty for the animals as predators. A few of the bigger ranchers that have been special sufferers have hired trappers to rid them of the pest. One south Texas ranch reported a single hired trapper on the ranch caught more than 300 coyotes in three weeks.

Don't know whether that is a record or not, but the trapper did well both for his boss and himself. In addition to the value of the pelts, he received a bounty of from $1 to $1.50 per coyote.

Elsewhere in the West, particularly in the open desert country, coyotes have been hunted and gunned from airplanes in addition to being trapped, or killed by poison bait for the bounty on them as predators.

Bobcats too have been on the increase, as have mountain lions in the wild mountain country of Arizona. Beaver are coming back throughout much of the trapping country.

The increase in the more commonly trapped valuable fur-bearers is proportionate. Mink, muskrats, skunks and 'coons have all experienced a wartime respite from the trapper's inroads. Like a ripe crop, the resultant surplus is ready to be harvested.

Along the Salmon river in Idaho—famous River-of-No-Return—are hills, blanketed with snow in the wintertime, where bobcats may be trapped in the canyon, and foxes caught in the higher elevations. It's coyote country too.

There are mink and muskrats along many of the lesser known creeks and tributary streams that should afford trappers a handsome season's catch, or a chance to lay out a trapline that will provide work for years.

In the same category of increased wildlife population are the trapper's mountain haunts in the Pacific Northwest States of Oregon and Washington.

The Far Places

The experienced trapper who knows the ropes and wants to tackle the far places might do well in Alaska, but he should remember before he plans the trip that a non-resident trapping license will set him back $50, and it is necessary that he reside within the Territory for three years before he can become eligible for the more nominal resident trapping license.

Northern Canada is good trapping country, and has been ever since the earliest days of the famous Hudson's Bay Company. But it is necessary to become a British subject and a resident of Canada before you can trap there.

There is no need, however, to go so far afield. In fact the part time trapper can set his traps for the two most common fur-bearers, muskrats and skunks, most anywhere in the country where the animals are found and make anything from a pin money catch up to sizable winter earnings, as many a farmer, or farm boy, already knows.

Marshes, ponds and the banks of slow moving streams are the muskrat's favorite habitat. It is there they build their peculiar dome-shaped dens out of the reeds, and sticks and water grasses found nearby. Swamp flags and reed grass provide them with cover, and food, though they will also eat mussels, crayfish and sometimes catfish.

Along streams muskrats usually build their dens in low, overhanging, grass-covered banks. The den entrances may be just at the edge of, or below, the water line.

Trapped in Winter

Muskrats are trapped in winter when their fur is prime. A popular set for bank muskrat dens is to place the trap just inside the den entrance, making sure there is enough room for the rat to swim into it. The stake should be set out the full length of the chain in water deep enough to drown a trapped rat quickly.

If local or State game laws permit the practice marsh and pond "rats" may be trapped by setting the traps on the sides of the built-up muskrat house.

Otherwise they may be caught by trap sets placed strategically in the trails they make through the swamp grasses, or along slides and paths formed by their passage to and from the water. A Number 1 trap, the same

size trap as used for skunks, mink and weasels, will hold a muskrat in a drowning set. This trap has a 4 inch draw spread.

A Million-Dollar Crop

Out here in Texas some 17,000 persons do a little or a lot of trapping each year, and the value of the crop they obtain runs close to a million dollars annually.

From point of numbers caught the principal fur-bearers are 'possum, skunk, muskrat and coon. Fox and mink, as well as coyotes, are also trapped by the thousands every year.

Texas muskrat run in three species, the Louisiana 'rat found in southeast Texas in the country back of Beaumont, the Pecos river muskrat, and the Panhandle section's Great Plains muskrat.

Mink are trapped in the wooded regions and watered thickets of east Texas. Beaver are found in the State. The broad-tail beaver ranges along the Rio Grande and Devil's river.

Once widely distributed and heavily trapped, the animal known as the Texas beaver is now rare. It is found only in a few special localities, notably on the Llano river and in Polk county.

Bobcats are caught in the wooded country

[*Turn page*]

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in east, south and southwest Texas. They are perhaps most plentiful in the Big Thicket, where both trappers and hunters annually make a sizable catch.

Texas coyotes have already been mentioned as on the increase. Coyotes are found on the plains, in the Rio Grande country in the southwestern part of the State as well as in central and south Texas.

Another predator, the wolf, is still hunted and trapped throughout parts of Texas. The once abundant lobo wolf found in the western section of the State has been fairly well cleaned out. But there are "timber" wolves in some parts of east and east central Texas. The Texas red wolf is found in the south and central portions of the Lone Star State.

In short Texas is trapping country as well as cow country. In common with the rest of the West trapping is looking up and fur buyers are advertising regularly in the local papers.

A Seasonal Occupation

Trapping is, of course, largely a seasonal occupation. A great many make trapping a part time job. Others spend their whole year at it, using the spring and summer months and the rest of the non-trapping period to

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repair their home cabins, scout out new traplines, cut their winter fuel and generally get ready for the coming season's catch.

Such men are professional trappers, men to whom no wilderness is too deep to penetrate, no mountain fastness too hard to push into. They are men who have learned through years of experience every quirk and habit of the wary creatures they seek to lure to their carefully laid trap sets. And by and large they are the men who make the most money at it!

A Way of Life

Trappers seldom get rich. Fur prices fluctuate, and seasons vary. But postwar boom or no, professional trapper or part time fur hunter, each day in the open is a new adventure, each trap set a new possibility.

To the real trapper, the man who loves the wild country, trapping is a way of life as

[*Turn page*]

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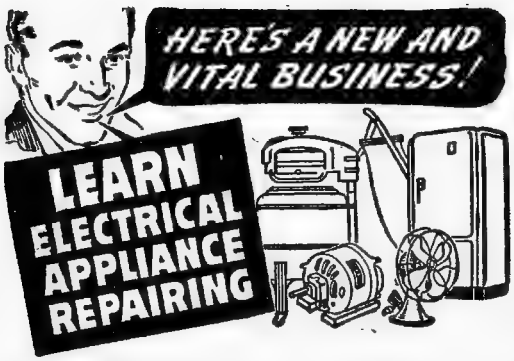

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—CAPTAIN RANGER

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

THE deputy of Apache Butte looked at two powerfully unusual hombres standing at his desk, and with a shiver of agony he remembered them. The lanky visitor with the long, tired face, sad eyes and wide mouth was "Tombstone" Jones. The other gent was a shrunken copy of Tombstone, except that he was trying hard to grow a mustache. He was "Speedy" Smith.

"How come you fellers drifted down here?" Deputy "Stormy" Knight inquired with misgivings.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Stormy," said Tombstone. "We heard there's a good reward for the Red Mask. So we come down to git it."

"That," the law man pointed out, "ain't nothin' to joke about."

"Is he bad?" asked Speedy curiously.

"He's plenty bad," the deputy sheriff replied. "He stuck up the bank at Saguero Flats, shot the cashier, and got away with a good haul. He's stuck up the stage between here and Saguero Flats twice. Once he got a shipment of money for the bank here, and the last time he got the payroll of one of the mines. He also killed Al Spangler, the guard. He stuck up Don Ellis, a cowboy from the Broken Shoe, and J. Harrison Cartwright, the owner, when they was comin' from Saguero Flats in a buckboard. Don didn't have more'n a couple dollars, but Cartwright had a few hundred, a good watch and a diamond ring. My, my, was he mad!"

"The Red Mask was?" asked Tombstone.

"No, the new owner of the Broken Shoe," the law man replied angrily. "Cartwright said he was goin' to have the best detective on earth sent down here to get that Red Mask. He swore all kinds of punishment for the Red Mask. Offered a thousand dollars reward for him, before he left. That

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makes five thousand dollars reward for the Red Mask."

"Thank you, Stormy," Tombstone said, grinning from ear to ear.

For Tombstone and Speedy were the "best detectives on earth" sent to Apache Butte to corral the coyote who wore a red mask. And thus the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN begins another side-splitting novel by W. C. Tuttle about those two hair-raising favorites, Tombstone and Speedy.

COYOTE LUCK FOR TOMBSTONE is the title of this featured opus in which our C.P.A. pards run into as loco a situation as they ever encountered in their whacky wanderings. This time they make a short overnight visit to Mexico and return with a captive—which is plumb against the law, for they've got no right to drag a gent across the Border without a lot of papers signed by United States and Mexican officials.

"Just where did you arrest this Poco hombre, Tombstone?" Deputy Stormy Knight asks with qualms, knowing full well that the C.P.A. man did the job down in Mexico, where Tombstone had no right to arrest anybody.

"Where?" Tombstone asks, keeping a straight face. "Well, I—uh—this country I'm talkin' about is awful strange to me, deputy. But I think I arrested Poco jist our side of the Border."

[*Turn page*]

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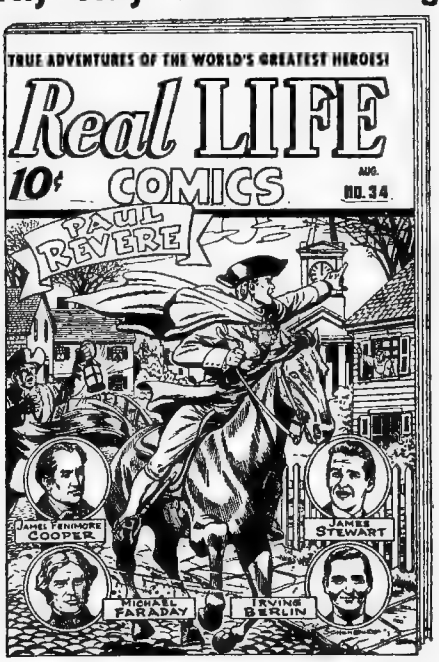

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"I see," says Knight. "Well, it's all right. But as a matter of fact I don't believe any of you."

"You mean it don't sound good?" Tombstone asks. "I'm tellin' yuh that me an, Speedy went to Agua Verde in Mexico just to look around. We et supper in a little cafe an' we ordered steaks. My piece o' meat was cut off the left hip of the cow critter, which had been branded pretty deep. Right there on my plate was the Broken Shoe brand, as plain as yuh please.

"I asked the cook where-at he buys such de-licious meat, an' he tells me he buys it all from Poco Aguilar. We find the two gents that's missin', Oscar an' Angel, an' all four of us went to Poco's corral, which we finds full of stolen Broken Shoe cows. We get our broncs and opened the gate, intendin' to take back what Poco borrowed. But we ain't more'n got goin' well, until here comes Poco an' about a hundred of his rough *compadres.*

"I yells to the boys," Tombstone continued his strange narration, "an' says, 'Take them cows to the Border, boys. I'll hold back Poco's men for yuh.' Well, sir, I laid back and swapped shots with that army, until I drives 'em all to cover. But as soon as I start on, here comes the remnants of that army agin. It was like that all the way to the Border, and Poco is the only survivor to reach it.

"The boys have got the cows across the Line by that time, when me an' Poco git together. Our guns are empty, an' we lock in mortal combat. It was a case of Truth agin Corruption—and Truth won, which it allus does. I knocked Poco down seven or eight times, and the last time he fell on our side of the Border. So I took him."

At least, that's Tombstone's explanation. And it's a mighty good one, if you ask us, just as everything else he does is sure-fire entertainment and the best of reading. And COYOTE LUCK FOR TOMBSTONE hits the target every single shot, so long as Tombstone and Speedy are doing the shooting. It's a howler for the *must* list.

Another favorite character, Navajo Tom Raine, the Arizona Territorial Ranger, follows Tombstone and Speedy in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN, in a powder-exploding novelet by Jackson Cole, entitled RANGER ON THE RUN.

It's a tale packed with thrills from the moment Navajo walks into a beanery and a knock-down-drag-out scrap with strangers. Puzzled over why these men should want to kill him, the Ranger starts an investigation that leads him down under the earth into a complicated maze of abandoned mining tunnels under the old town. RANGER ON THE RUN is full of surprises and crammed with action.

Here is a small sample:

Navajo Raine stepped out from behind the shoulder of stone. He came down the tunnel like a tall shadow, his moccasins making no sound. He stepped ten feet behind the three men, who were all watching the senseless girl closely for signs of revival.

"Need some help?" Raine's voice was a somber sound in the tunnel.

Bill Yeager and his two hirelings whirled, their eyes goggling at the tall ranger who stood there, brown face wooden, green eyes narrow, bright slits that watched them alertly. The lamplight struck dancing highlights from the turquoise grips of Raine's guns, and from the white teeth that flashed between lips that grinned without mirth.

"Raine!" Bill Yeager said, and his voice came back in hollow echoes, as if the tomb itself were mocking him.

"You three are under arrest, for robbin' two stages of gold bullion and murderin' a shotgun guard and stage driver durin' each of the two robberies," Raine intoned coldly.

"Kill the hellion!" Nate Pearson's nasal voice screamed. "If we don't blast him down——"

But, as Raine had already guessed, fat Lew Castle was the deadliest of the trio. Castle's moon face was grinning, his pale gray eyes wide and innocent looking when his pudgy hands blurred to his side.

Navajo Raine's hands moved, too, yet his guns were just clearing leather when Lew Castle's six-shooter threw thunder along the tunnel.

A new Alamo Paige story about the Pony Express by Reeve Walker will be at the head of the list of other yarns in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN. The tale is entitled IN THE LINE OF DUTY, and it moves as fast as Alamo can ride, for he runs into a group of cavalrymen beleagured by an Indian war party and his job is to deliver a letter pleading for reinforcements.

Of course, another TRAIL BLAZERS chat will be back with us again in order to make EXCITING WESTERN a prize-winning issue. Be on hand for some swell reading thrills.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE first letter we opened in the mail today had two very interesting complaints to make about our favorite pards, Tombstone and Speedy. We'd like to know how the rest of you fans feel about it. Here's the letter:

I think EXCITING WESTERN is a first class Western magazine, but there are two things I don't like about Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith.

First I would like for them to be handsome and bet-

[*Turn page*]

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ter looking. Second I would like for them to have more brains.

Aside from those two things you have a swell magazine.

—*Charles Barnett, Gate City, Va.*

Of course, Tombstone and Speedy can't help how they look, any more than anybody else can. We never thought they were short on brains. But we may have been mistaken, so the rest of you readers that haven't got the charlie horse in your writing muscles might send an opinion on the subject. We'd be powerful happy to hear from you.

Another reader doesn't feel quite the way Mr. Barnett does:

THUNDER RIVER VALLEY sold me the first EXCITING WESTERN I ever read. W. C. Tuttle is a Western writer I have read since 1923. I notice that real Westerners like Tuttle's stories, while a certain Mr. Hicks from Boston doesn't. Well, who cares? I find Tombstone and Speedy perfect. I have read five over and over and haunt the newsstands for the next numbers.—*Rosalie M. Eckerlein, Springfield, Mass.*

And here's another reader's opinion:

I have been reading the last issue of EXCITING WESTERN and enjoy it because I am fond of Texas. I enjoyed the old story NO MONEY—NO WATER. I like different stories. As for Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, they are pretty good.—*Private Otis Allen, U. S. Army.*

It sure is good to hear from the Armed Services about our stories, for those readers are far from home and EXCITING WESTERN many times brings them right back to the good old U.S.A. in their minds.

It's a cinch that if you fans don't tell us what you like then the editor won't know what to print. So get busy and drop a line to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40 Street, New York 16, New York. We'll be waiting to hear from you.

Good-by now! And thanks to everybody.

—THE EDITOR.

Tombstone and Speedy Are Fast, Funny, Furious

IN

Coyote Luck for Tombstone

by

W. C. TUTTLE

NEXT ISSUE'S FEATURED NOVELET!

TROUBLE BREWING

(Concluded from page 87)

Ann back from the dying man. Down the road behind them Bill Dart was limping, a six-gun in his hand.

"He tried to stop me on the road," Bill Dart called. "But I was watching out after your warning, Dave. I drove with a gun in my hand and I shot at the first sign of trouble. I just managed to dive clear of the buckboard when they started shooting at me, and I crawled away into the trees where they couldn't find me."

Ruth Ann heard the death rattle in Curly Lambert's throat. She turned and Dave Stewart folded her into his arms.

"I trailed the stolen cattle to Curly Lambert's range," Dave Stewart explained as he held the girl tightly. "I wanted to force the Gun Ranch to come into the open, so I left a note tacked to the corral fence that the Cattle Association knew what Lambert was up to."

"The Cattle Association!" Ruth Ann exclaimed. "Do you mean that you are their agent?"

"That's right," Dave Stewart said. "I'm a detective for the C.A. Lambert's rodeo stock bears some pretty funny brand marks, and we were looking into it. That's why I got a job with his spread and why I could afford to work for you. But all that can wait, darling. It looks as if I solved myself a much bigger problem."

"What in tarnation is that?" Bill Dart demanded.

Dave Stewart's lips were pressed against Ruth Ann's mouth, and she forgot everything except the clamor of her heart. For she knew what the bronc stomper meant. The problem that he had solved was to find the one girl in the world.

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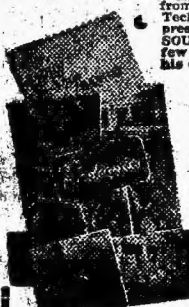

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